

Moll Flanders

The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, by Daniel Defoe. With an introduction by Carl Van Doren. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$4.00.

IF it is necessary to fasten the distinction upon any one, Defoe was the first English novelist. To this title others have added that of the first journalist. The mind that fashioned, out of fact and fiction curiously, inextricably mixed, this tale of Moll Flanders, with its lack of design, of ingenuity, of imagination, with its unflagging verisimilitude and pious varnish, with its tedious procession of prosaic detail adding up, somehow, to a total uncommonly alive, is the mind of a man in whom the journalist and the novelist were Siamese Twins. Out of his notebook full of police-court frailty, petty larceny, sidewalk dialogue and humdrum vice this reporter has, by an art known least of all to himself, pasted together a story as substantial and fascinating as its parts are trifling and commonplace.

No wonder that the French naturalists, when Marcel Schwob had translated Moll Flanders for them, hailed Defoe almost as a newly discovered ancestor. But in one essential he was not their man at all. Their method was very much on their minds; they were highly, often absurdly self-conscious in their efforts to conscript nature in the service of literature; they went about observing the details of life with an omnivorous, promiscuous zeal pardonable, perhaps, in an entomologist just landed on an unexplored island. They never forgot that they were pioneers in a new way of writing about people. In the light of this cerebral preoccupation, Defoe has as little in common with the naturalists as he has with a very opposite type, the volcanic, unself-conscious novelist out of whose dark mental soil sprout strange luxuriances in profuse inevitability. Defoe's plot of ground was natively pretty barren; but we do not find him sprinkling it with a brand new watering-can and a self-conscious gesture. How then, with his lack of both land and agriculture, did he raise so remarkable a crop? How, with its poverty of mind, of incident, and of language, does Moll Flanders manage to remain, after all, so rich?

Defoe had almost as little mind as the lens of a camera. This would be less noticeable were it not for his engaging smugness in reassuring the reader that the story is after all a highly moral one, his hope that they "will be more pleased with the moral than the fable," his boast that "as the whole relation is carefully garbled of all the levity and looseness that was in it, so it is all applied . . . to virtuous and religious ends." "To give the history of a wicked life repented of"—that he insists, is what most moved him to write it. And he would have us believe that since "the wicked part should be made as wicked as the real history of it will bear . . . an author must be hard put to it to wrap it up so clean as not to give room, especially for vicious readers, to turn it to his disadvantage." The wrapping comes loose once in a while, but on the whole Defoe managed to brush the whole over with enough sugar to suit the curious moral taste of his time. Quite obviously he wanted readers rather than better morals. He had struck a rich vein in Robinson Crusoe, and followed up this success with the publication of other adventurous tales, among them Moll Flanders, some of which were probably written earlier than Crusoe. So Moll Flanders, in the writing of which nothing was farther from his mind than a work of art, is hardly even the work of a novelist, but rather a

piece of pot-boiling by a man who thoroughly liked the job.

Defoe certainly enjoyed this particular job, in his industrious, matter-of-fact way. There are no signs that his interest in what he is telling flagged at any moment. Remarkable indeed it is that none of the tedious parts of the story—and there are many—seem in the least to have bored their narrator. The story appears to have for him that constant interest which we associate as a rule only with people who are telling the story of their own lives.

If he had not cast Moll Flanders in autobiographical form the result might have been very different. In letting Moll recite all the facts and details and slightest incidents of her life he gives the best example I know of a projection of total recall. Better than a reporter—part of whose person is nearly always visible—Defoe was only a pen in Moll's hand. He might have heard the story exactly as he wrote it down—except for the pious and repentant tone, though even that sounds far more as if it came from her than from him. Among the countless writers possessed of what we call imagination, in all degrees from creative genius to mere day-dreaming, there is no place for Defoe. His imagination was of a different kind entirely. He could imagine not so much the occurrence of a certain train of events as how those events would be narrated by the person to whom they had happened. This subtle ability to seem the faithful, unconscious reporter of what he had himself invented was a substitute for the true imagination in which he was lacking, and the book is a monument to a fictional technique of which he was utterly unaware, and which no one writing after him will be likely to recapture by the exercise of thought.

We are as interested in Moll Flanders, and as willing to endure her dullness and the patternless repetitions of her life as if we had been listening to her in the flesh and not reading the book. From her we accept hours of unnecessary detail which we would never bear from a mere author. For Moll everything in her weak, calculating life is interesting: the thousand ordinary things her various lovers said to her, and the thousand and one unremarkable words she replied to dismiss, keep or get them; the trivial locality and chronology of her wanderings; the detailed advice sought, and put prosaically into effect; the financial minutiae of a shrewd woman who was a fairly respectable harlot and a not over-skillful thief. At one time, as she is about to make an advantageous marriage, she finds herself to be, somewhat inconveniently, with child, and goes to a discreet establishment where such misfortunes can become, cheaply and quietly, part of a noiseless past. The cheapness in particular delights her, and she tells us, not only what she had to pay herself, but, in two elaborate pages, the three separate itemized tariffs offered to its patrons by the baby farm. "For a nurse for the month, and the finest suit of child-bed linen, £4:4. For a supper, the gentlemen to send in the wine, £6." And so on to the last shilling.

Of such trifles is built up the reality of Moll, accurate, foolish, lucky, calculating, prosaic, pious Moll, as real a person as any one we know. A minor classic, by virtue of simple secrets which will be the despair of really intelligent novelists whose creations she will outlive. The secret, if it can be given a name, is that precious human documentation which the naturalists courted as the key to truth itself. But they wrote their documents into a book, while Defoe's documents seem to have been spoken out of a life.

ROBERT LITTELL.

A Vortex in the Nineties

Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters, by Thomas Beer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

MR. THOMAS BEER'S *Stephen Crane* is the latest and not one of the least satisfactory contributions to the twentieth century portrait gallery of nineteenth century celebrities inaugurated five years ago by Mr. Lytton Strachey. Since Eminent Victorians English biography, much to every one's surprise, has become what it has long been in France: a form of literary art. "Those two fat volumes," at \$7.50 a set, which Mr. Strachey deplored in 1918, have already begun to disappear and we have instead, if not always masterpieces, at least narratives which are critical and selective and of dimensions appropriate to their importance.

Mr. Beer, however, differs from most of his fellows in not imitating Strachey's style as well as his economy and order—which is rather a relief after one has seen Mr. Harold Nicholson try to reproduce the whole culminating page of Queen Victoria in one of the very first chapters of his Tennyson and watched Mr. Guedalla's complacent endeavors to duplicate Mr. Strachey's irony by imitating his technique and his tone without having been gifted with the critical sense which give tone and technique their point. Mr. Beer has gone for his style to a writer who had already before Strachey brought something of Strachey's ironic accent to the chronicle of the nineteenth century: he has gone to our own Henry Adams. He patronizes American politics in precisely Adams's manner and even imitates those curiously artificial transitions—perhaps the result in Adams's case of his inveterate desire to impose unity on a set of phenomena that appalled him by their inconsequence—which in *The Education of Henry Adams* and the *History of the United States* sometimes suggests that the smooth-flowing garment of style covers rather vague intellectual contours. Thus Mr. Beer writes: "This jape (of Mark Twain about Henry James) was in London six months later, but Crane, a few blocks to the north of its making, was far from well," or, "He had read with appreciation Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* when Karl Harriman brought the book to Brede in summer but appetite ceased and Mrs. Crane had agitated conferences with friends as to Switzerland and the Black Forest." Mr. Beer's mistake, like Henry Adams's on similar occasions, was in ever trying to combine Hamsun's *Hunger* and Crane's increasing illness in one sentence at all.

But Mr. Beer, in spite of this and some other defects of style, has written an incredibly entertaining book about one of the most unpromising of periods. The eighties and nineties in America appear—at least to one who was born on the hither edge of them—perhaps the most provincial and uninspired moment in the history of American society. It sometimes seems to me that it is even possible to detect a distinct intellectual decline between Americans educated in the seventies and Americans educated in the eighties. In the seventies, men were still living on the culture and believing in the social ideal which had survived from the founding of the Republic. The doctors, the professors, the lawyers and the churchmen who were educated in the seventies had at once a certain all-round humanism and a dignified seriousness about life; they had an integrity of moral ideal. But by the eighties Business had flooded in and ideals were in confusion: the lawyer was on his way to become a corporation lawyer and keep

Business out of jail, the doctor was on his way to be a "specialist" and put Business in a sanitarium and the university and the church were on their way to be abandoned by first-rate men altogether. In the meantime, the men of the eighties found themselves launched, with whatever culture or honesty of purpose, in a world where much money was to be made and everybody was beginning to make money. Humanism was put to rout; moral ideals became impossible; and seriousness about man and his problems was entirely abrogated in favor of the curious seriousness of Business about things which are not serious. The state became identified with Business; ideas were shot on sight. People had rather a good time, one supposes; at least they spent a great deal of money. But life, in the long run, seems to have been rather unsatisfactory. What was an educated man to do, who might once have served the Republic or followed an interesting profession in a society which offered stability and leisure? Become the slave of Business at one extreme or drink himself to death at the other, but in any case absorb unconsciously enough of the commercial ideal to neutralize any other conception with which he may originally have started. For the most depressing thing about the period was that it did not even realize its tragedy. It was only afterwards that people like Mrs. Wharton and Mr. Van Wyck Brooks began to understand and write about it.

Now Mr. Beer's success with this un-self-conscious epoch is attained not merely through his minute knowledge of it and his exquisite appreciation of its humors but from the fact that he has found in the sprawling and unorganized, the prosaic and Philistine America of the end of the century a point of intellectual dignity from which to focus it. Stephen Crane was a single vortex of intensity in an almost stagnant sea. He was an artist not as the age understood artists but as the world understands them. I do not say that he was a great artist or that he was even of the first rank, but what he had was the real thing and he adulterated it with nothing else. He had arrived in prose, apparently without knowing anything about Maupassant and the rest of the school of Flaubert, at precisely their exact method and their ironic point of view, and in verse at a concise vers libre which at its best has scarcely been surpassed by any of the more profuse vers libristes who have since received greater publicity; and he practised his art without infection by journalism of any kind. In fact, according to Mr. Beer, after years of training as a newspaper man, he was never even able to write newspaper copy successfully; he could no more suspend his artistic sincerity to write a half-column account of a fire than he could, in Active Service, to concoct a popular novel. And, as a result of this single-minded devotion to a purpose which at the time was as little comprehensible to Richard Watson Gilder as it was to Mrs. Astor, he was regarded with universal suspicion. Joseph Conrad, who knew him well, and Mr. Beer, who has been at pains to investigate, both bear witness in this book that Crane could never really have been described as dissipated and his writing is certainly the work of a man of unblunted intellectual edge; yet he was accused of everything from drug-taking and dying in delirium tremens to seducing country girls and attempting to burn James Gordon Bennett's yacht. As he said, in 1896, "When people see a banker taking a glass of beer in a café, they say, There is Smith. When they behold a writer taking a glass of beer, they say, Send for the police!"

As I have said, it is the presence of a man of this kind which seems to touch the period with importance. All