

# THE BOOK TABLE

## GEORGE KENNAN'S BIOGRAPHY OF E. H. HARRIMAN<sup>1</sup>

BY FREDERICK M. DAVENPORT

GEORGE KENNAN has done an able piece of work in memory of Edward H. Harriman—a piece of work that will enlarge the reputation of Harriman among Americans as one of the most vigorous and useful public personalities of his period. His daring, his courage, his tremendously constructive vision; his will to do, not so much for the sake of power, although he loved power, as for the sake of making his railways serve his country and the world. This picture from out the pages of Kennan's volumes makes an ineffaceable impression on the mind.

Harriman loved power and used ruthlessly every bit of it that he possessed when it was necessary so to use it. The ruthless side of Harriman, which was distinctly in the America of his period and showed itself both in American finance and in American politics, is too lightly touched by Kennan. Thus his biography becomes on this side an apology, when it should have been a human interpretation. There is a vast deal of paper wasted in justifying the Chicago and Alton activities of Harriman, which were the subject of comparatively unsuccessful attack by the Inter-State Commerce Commission and the Federal Government. Kennan pleads that everything was legal, within the rules of the time, and that the Government could not find otherwise. While this is measurably true, it is also true that the Chicago and Alton activities of Harriman are those, in particular of all his doings, which display from the beginning a dominant interest in profit rather than in railway soundness and service. In this respect the Chicago and Alton matter is very difficult to explain, because it seems unlike Harriman in any other of his great railway dealings.

Kennan has been very successful in his chapters on "The Break with Roosevelt" in establishing in the reader's good will the position of Harriman. This is all the more surprising because in its day the Roosevelt point of view swept all before it and public opinion in the country at large was heavily anti-Harriman. During the Roosevelt Administrations Harriman was the great railway figure of the country. He had combined the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific and Central Pacific and Oregon Short Line into a great system which dominated the economic and often the political western part of the United States. After the vigorous struggle against them, he had joined with Hill and Morgan in the formation of the

Northern Securities Company, to establish forever railway unity in the western and northwestern sections of the United States. Unfortunately for him, because nothing came of it but trouble, Harriman had dipped into New York State and National politics, in a field in which he had not a clever hand. He had become, as so many wealthy men have been beguiled by politicians into becoming, a collector of campaign funds in emergencies for the party, and the results to Harriman were not satisfactory. He thought that he had not obtained that peculiarly square deal out of it, that reasonable *quid pro quo* which many a business man has expected under the same circumstances! Congressman James S. Sherman had come to Harriman for financial help in the Congressional elections of 1906, had been sadly rebuffed, and had reported to President Roosevelt some very unwise alleged remarks of Harriman about an easier and more direct way of reaching Legislatures, Congress, and even the judiciary.

It was on the basis of the report of Sherman and on the basis of the general psychology of the period against railway arrogance and combination, of which Roosevelt was the National spokesman, that the President attacked Harriman as a typical malefactor of great wealth and a general all-around undesirable citizen. Harriman was caught in a very unequal political struggle, and was much disturbed. It so happened that Maxwell Evarts, a son of Justice Evarts, had been present with Sherman at the campaign conference with Harriman. Harriman took Evarts to the White House, where Evarts declared that no such language as Sherman had reported had been used by Harriman on that occasion. Although this should perhaps have been sufficient to have caused at least a shadow of reasonable doubt upon the Sherman-Harriman controversy, it never altered Roosevelt's policy towards Harriman in the slightest.

In fact, other Harriman-Roosevelt episodes in Kennan's volumes go far to convince the reader that Roosevelt, though he meant to be, was, in fact, not entirely just to Harriman. Harriman, with all his faults, appears to have been an intensely patriotic American. One of his most dynamic acts of patriotic service was his saving of the great Imperial Valley in southern California from the overflow of the runaway Colorado River, following a series of gigantic floods in the year 1906. Nothing but the dogged persistence and overwhelming efficiency of Harriman saved the homes and the lives of many thousands

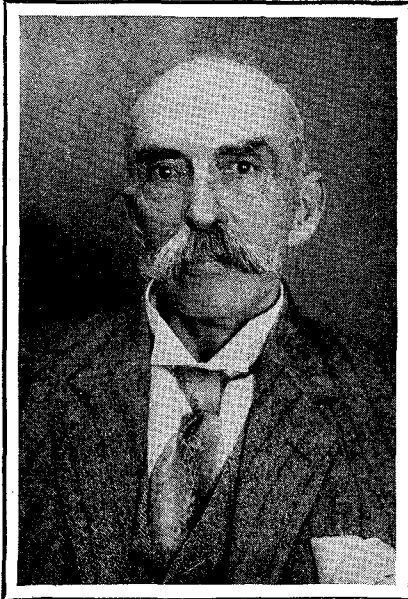
of people and many millions of Government property. The whole Southern Pacific Railway organization was thrown into the breach, although the Southern Pacific had far less to lose than any other party in interest. The Government at Washington was helpless, but at Roosevelt's urging Harriman stuck to the task in the face of vast obstacles. He finally won, closed the breach and saved the wonderful Imperial Valley. It was at the very time when the Federal Government was hot on the trail of Harriman, and Roosevelt did him scant justice for his great service.

It is an interesting problem in human psychology, but I think understandable. As a matter of fact, each in his own field, Harriman and Roosevelt had notable characteristics in common. Harriman had the same daring, the same courage, the same constructive vision in business and finance that Roosevelt had in politics. And I have never known two men so much alike to understand each other, anyway. Besides, they had something of the same ruthlessness when it came to putting across what each thought should be put across. The true friends of Roosevelt always recognized both his great unselfishness and his terrific ruthlessness when once his mind was fixed upon a goal and those whom he thought he had reason to regard as enemies of his country were in his way. At times like that a passionate sense of getting a thing done right took possession of him, to the exclusion of all thought about personalities, friendships, or too close and enfeebling an analysis of facts. It was a terribly effective quality for the good of his country, but it sometimes led him into injustice to persons.

In the Harriman case, Roosevelt was the fighting leader of righteousness against some of the iniquities of the railways in his time. Harriman was a type. Harriman personified the iniquity. In his passionate eagerness to win the battle, as he conceived it, for his country Roosevelt instinctively preferred the testimony of Sherman to the testimony of Evarts and paid no attention to which of them might be mistaken, paid no regard to reasonable doubt. The testimony of Sherman nailed the malefactor of great wealth to the cross and did more than anything else to weaken Harriman in the battle before the public opinion of the country.

Both Harriman and Roosevelt were great. Each of them sought, with a greater or less degree of unselfishness, the honor and prosperity of his country. With Harriman financial profit and commercial power counted much; with Roosevelt they counted nothing. Harriman had wonderful economic vision, greater than Roosevelt's. Roosevelt had wonderful political and moral vision, the greatest of his age. It is not necessary that Roosevelt's friends should make

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Harriman: A Biography. By George Kennan. 2 vols. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. \$7.50.



Bain

GEORGE KENNAN

him an idol; that would only mar his fame.

Kennan makes out a good case for the human side of Harriman. When he was still a very young man and had neither wealth nor reputation, he gave himself with abandon to the organization and maintenance of a famous boys' club of very large membership on the East Side in New York, a club that for thirty years he backed in its many good works with zeal and faithfulness. In 1907, two years before Harriman died, after one of the entertainments in the club auditorium, a reporter for the New York "Herald" interviewed some of the boys as to their impressions of their founder and helper. These boys had seen Mr. Harriman. Some of them had talked with him. One of them, twelve years of age, said: "Mr. Harriman's a great man. He's the president of a railway, and he's worth a couple of thousand, anyway. He's a quiet man, and never tells anybody down here anything about his business. He isn't what I'd call a good-looking man, but I'll bet he could put up a good fight. He lives 'way up-town somewhere, in a house all to himself."

Another twelve-year-old: "He is the nicest man I ever saw, and he gives us boys uniforms and pays for our plays. He looks just like a man who lives down here on our block, and you wouldn't think he's such a wonderful man. His clothes are just like my father's and he talks just like the rest of us. He works all day and all night, but he has to, because his railroads run all the time and he has to tend to them."

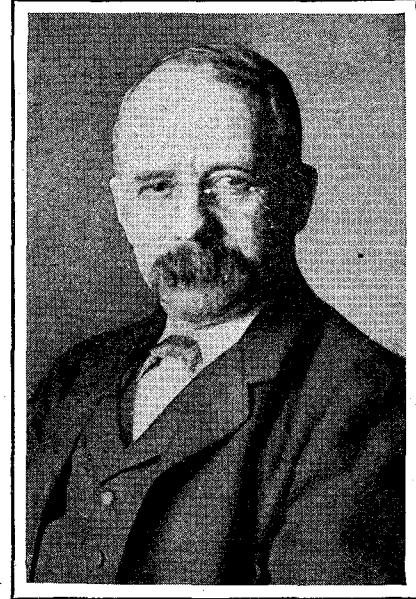
One boy, fifteen years of age, said: "I'd rather be President of the country than president of the railways, because if you're president of the railways people say you're a bad man. They say things like that about Mr. Harriman, but we know they ain't true. If they were, he wouldn't treat us boys the way

he does. Nobody makes him—he just does it himself."

Harriman's scientific expeditions to Alaska with John Burroughs and John Muir, his lifelong support of Dr. Trudeau in his splendid work with victims of tuberculosis at Saranac, his vast helpfulness at San Francisco at the time of the great earthquake and fire, his constructive conciliation whenever compromise was necessary to progress—these and many other incidents of his life disclose a human nature that was far from being selfish and refractory underneath, however much the surface impressions of personality might at times indicate the contrary.

Harriman was always in a struggle with the economic shortcomings of American public opinion and the American Government about railway affairs. Undoubtedly the political organization of the railways in many a commonwealth and the monopolist trend of railway minds aroused an instinctive and on the whole sound opposition on the part of the American people. But the right was not all on the side of the railway reformers. Every year since Harriman died has disclosed the need of greater unity of action and organization in order to eliminate inefficiency and waste from American railways. American law, American government, and popular opinion have always been opposed to "pooling" of railway interests. I think economists are now generally agreed that if long ago pooling had been freely allowed under Federal supervision both the railways and the country would be economically better off than they are at present. Harriman's genius and vision were in line with sound economics. But, it is also true that, in the last analysis, if either a Harriman or the country is to control, it must be the country.

The battles and skirmishes between Harriman and Morgan as set forth in Kennan's pages are very illuminating. Morgan was intrenched in the center of financial power, and usually the technical honors of the struggle went to him, as notably in the battle for the control of the Northern Pacific. On the other hand, Harriman's ideas about railways were usually wiser than Morgan's and turned out that way in the end. Harriman single-handed saved the Erie from the mistakes of Morgan. And the Union Pacific system itself is a monument to the superior insight of Harriman, who reorganized the road with enormous and permanent success after Morgan gave it up. In fact, one gets the impression that Harriman was nearly as good a financier as Morgan and a far better railway man. The growing hostility and dislike of the house of Morgan to the rising figure of Harriman were obviously an asset to the Federal Government in its hunting of Harriman, although it must be said for Roosevelt that he attacked Morgan and Harriman without fear or favor, each in his own time and each for the purpose of win-



(C) Underwood

E. H. HARRIMAN

ning the battle of the country against what Roosevelt regarded and the country regarded as the iniquities of the railways.

Harriman was a hard-working genius, but he was a genius born. At every stage he had the touch of a master workman and the vision of a master mind. He saw that a great unified railway system was essential to the arousing and developing of the mighty West. He furnished the perfect railway system, and the West responded. Somebody in an argument before the United States Industrial Commission said disparagingly: "Harriman didn't create the great West. God Almighty did that." To which Kennan replies with the story of the Russian peasant who begrudged the ten kopeks that he had to pay for a tea-kettle full of hot water. "God made the water," he declared, "and he gives it freely to everybody." "Yes, my little brother," replied the dispenser of the hot aqueous fluid, "God made the water, but he didn't make it hot around these parts. If you want God's water, go to the river and fill your old tea-kettle."

Harriman's vision was a world vision. He nearly succeeded in girdling the earth with a transportation system by water and rail. If it had not been for the inopportune sentiment created in Japan just then by the terms of the treaty between Japan and Russia—terms which were none too generous to Japan, anyway—Harriman would probably have completed an agreement with Japan and Russia for the development of the South Manchurian and Trans-Siberian railways in connection with his own Union Pacific roads and steamers. Thus he would have girdled the world. Japan nearly acquiesced, but not quite. At the vital moment Japanese sentiment revolted against any sort of American interference or control in that part of the world where she herself had secured,

at least from her standpoint, all too limited rights and privileges following much bloodshed and loss of treasure.

Harriman was born in an Episcopal rectory and inherited a certain pioneer daring from his father, who wandered as far as California in search of a pulpit; but the son inherited his balance and business capacity from his mother's side. He had conspicuous initiative and energy from the beginning. Dr. Trudeau, of Saranac, relates an incident of one of Harriman's trips as a young man to Paul Smith's Hotel in the Adirondacks. Paul Smith had purchased somewhere a gilt ball, which with great pride he had placed on the flagpole in front of the hotel. "I told Paul," says Trudeau, "that I knew if Ed Harriman got sight of that ball when he arrived the first thing he would do would be to shoot at it. As the stage stopped, Harriman jumped out, rifle in hand, caught sight of the bright ball at the top of the flagpole, and put a bullet through it before shaking hands with us all."

Thoroughness was Harriman's life motto. When he took possession of the Union Pacific, the road was in a deplorable condition. He learned all about it in an extraordinary way. With his engineers grouped about him in the observation car, he had the engine back that

car over the thousands of miles of his new line that he might chart every defect in rail or tie or bolt or curve or grade in the whole system. He seems never to have touched a railway without making it a better institution for the service of the community through which it ran and a more profitable property for everybody concerned. In this respect he was a marked contrast to the Jay Gould type.

It is doubtful if we shall see his like again. He belonged to the period of giants who made great contribution to material progress. In the early years of his era American government and public opinion were in a rather parlous state, measurably futile, and much looked down upon by the pioneering self-reliance of the giants. We now have a keener public opinion and a Government ever ready to act interferingly upon short notice. This is well. But is community efficiency going to take the place of the enormous individual efficiency of these earlier giants? Democracy has some distance to go before it fulfills the twofold function of looking out for the general welfare and at the same time providing efficiency and initiative either from public or private sources to make general welfare prosperous and productive.

Mr. Hammond, as to the contributions that can come to our political life from the profession of engineering. He says:

The engineer is exceptionally well qualified for public service. The quality of his training and the nature of his work compel him to take up every problem in the spirit of empirical science—a search for the truth; and he is accustomed to arrive at his conclusions only through a process of reasoning instead of through the influence of sentiment.

#### POETRY

**SECRET WAY (THE).** By Zona Gale. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$1.50.

Miss Zona Gale in her first book of poems attempts several forms with a high degree of success. She writes fairy stories in Spenserian stanzas, homely sketches of a Wisconsin town in free verse, employs *terza rima* with a deft touch, offers some excellently turned sonnets, and even includes a group of Hokku. She is not primarily a poet and poetry undoubtedly occupies a lesser place in her intellectual scheme than her prose, but there is a fine degree of sincerity in her verses. There is no doubt but that the "News Notes from Portage, Wisconsin" are the best part of the book, but none of them are quite short enough to lend themselves for successful quotation. The reader must be contented with "Wonder!"

Here are the shadows veiling green  
with gray  
And winning all the wonder from the  
light;  
Here phantom fragrance swells and  
faints like sound;  
The hour distills itself to dark; the  
day  
Dreams in its grave and lo, the dream  
is night.

Beloved, all the marvel of the May,  
The altared dark, the petals' solemn  
white,  
The moments rich with farewell from  
the lips  
Of dying moments—what are these?  
We lay  
Our love beside them and exceed the  
night.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

#### FICTION

**BESIDE THE TIDEWATER.** By Philip Hubbard. The Cornhill Publishing Company, Boston. \$1.75.

**RED BUD WOMEN.** By Mark O'Dea. The Stewart & Kidd Company, Cincinnati. \$2.

#### ESSAYS AND CRITICISM

**CATHOLIC SPIRIT IN MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE (THE).** By George N. Shuster. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$2.

#### EDUCATIONAL

**BRIEF SPANISH GRAMMAR.** By M. A. De Vittis. Allyn & Bacon, New York. \$1.40.

**EVERYDAY USES OF ENGLISH.** By Maurice H. Wesen. The Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York. \$2.

**HEALTHY CHILD FROM TWO TO SEVEN (THE).** A Handbook for Parents, Nurses, and Workers for Child Welfare. By Francis Hamilton MacCarthy, M.D. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$1.50.

#### SCIENCE

**SCIENCE AND HUMAN AFFAIRS.** By Winter-ton G. Curtis. Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York. \$4.

## THE NEW BOOKS

#### DRAMA

**ESTHER AND BERENICE.** Two Plays. By John Masefield. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$2.

The two dramas offered by Mr. Masefield in this volume must not be taken seriously by his readers. They were written primarily for a little group of amateur actors, among whom was the poet's daughter, Judith; and to afford this group simple dramas in verse, employing few properties and yet having stirring declamation and strong situations, Mr. Masefield turned to Racine. "Berenice" is for the most part a direct translation, but "Esther" is more of an adaptation, for the poet has removed entirely the French choruses and substituted matter of his own and greatly simplified the speeches. The results are two plays that would seem to be admirable additions to amateur drama, particularly to high school and small club endeavors.

**IF.** By Lord Dunsany. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York. \$1.75.

The idea of "If" is extremely entertaining, and it affords Lord Dunsany opportunity to introduce a large number of his exotic figures of romance from some mysterious land of the East. John Beal misses a train, and for ten years he wonders what would have happened if he had caught it. A magic crystal gives him opportunity to go back ten years in his life and catch that train, and the major portion of the drama presents the strange things which happen to him, among them his being whisked off to the East. The play is written in a vein of farce slightly more pronounced than we have been taught to

look for from Lord Dunsany, and there are even signs that he had his eye on a possibly successful stage production. Still "If" is extremely amusing reading.

#### HISTORY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

**GREAT AMERICAN ISSUES.** By John Hays Hammond and Jeremiah W. Jenks. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. \$2.

Instead of limiting the number of immigrants in any ethnic group to a percentage of such group residing here, these authors propose as a test the readiness with which various immigrating races tend to become citizens in their new country. Certainly such a policy, rather than the other, would improve the quality of our immigration. Moreover, its control should, as the authors suggest, be intrusted to a commission composed of members of highest quality and with powers permitting it to be lenient in requirements for admission at times when we need labor and rigid during periods of unemployment. Changes in the tariff can be most wisely worked out, warn these authors, as recommendations to Congress by a permanent tariff commission whose interests will be entirely non-partisan. In the relations between capital and labor the objects to be attained can be reached, not by separate, but by combined action. This explains, as the authors affirm, why labor leaders support and why certain reactionary capitalists oppose the principle of collective bargaining. At a time when the record of Mr. Hoover as Secretary of Commerce calls attention to the part played by engineers in our Government the reader will note the opinion of one of our most eminent engineers,