



Two Statesmen on Reading

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IT is always interesting to know what great men read. Sometimes the knowledge discloses a vein of common humanity that runs through great and small alike. I once surprised a distinguished, dignified, and highly intellectual professor of philosophy reading Anita Loos's "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." He was so absorbed that I thought he must be perusing Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" in the original tongue—which he was perfectly capable of doing. He looked a little guilty to be discovered in such companionship. But, instead of decreasing my respect for him, his light-hearted act raised him in my esteem. "He is a true philosopher," I thought, "for he recognizes Philosophy in whatever garb he finds her." For a moment I felt lifted out of my commonplace atmosphere into the empyrean of philosophic thought. For I had regarded "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"—although I had never dared to say so before this incident—as a little masterpiece, probably to become a classic like Xavier de Maistre's "Voyage autour de ma Chambre" or Gilbert White's "Natural History of Selborne." And now it had the cachet and I the confirmation of a philosopher. A book of philosophy it certainly is, not, however, of what could be called the Platonic school.

But I have strayed a long way from my title. I started out to report the views of two distinguished contemporary statesmen on books and reading, not my own unimportant opinions.

The London "Times" recently reported an address by the Prime Minister of England, Mr. Stanley Baldwin, in which he disclosed some of the boyhood reading that had influenced his subsequent career. There were in his bill of fare Scott's novels and poems; Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress;" the "Chronicles of

Froissart;" Grimm's "Fairy Tales;" Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare;" Dickens, whom he "reverenced in some ways as the greatest genius England ever produced"—a bold statement for a Prime Minister who cannot want the Thackerayites to join the Laborites in their attacks; and, finally, Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer." Mr. Baldwin believes that hearing the English Prayer-Book and the King James Bible Sunday after Sunday in his boyhood was in itself a liberal literary education. The Premier is not especially concerned about books for children. "I was left to myself to find my own provender in the library," he says. "If you do that with a child, he will always take the nourishment suitable to him."

Mr. Baldwin must have read Ruskin as well as Scott and Dickens, for Ruskin said more than sixty years ago—in "Sesame and Lilies," if my memory is reliable—that a young girl turned into a library will eschew the bad books as a fawn in a field eschews the noxious weeds. But that was in the era of the *jeune fille* and before the modern day when the young girl is supposed to see, hear, read, and know everything, and neither chews nor eschews in gulping down her literary diet, the nutritive calories of which she is inclined neither to measure nor consider.

Mr. Baldwin is, of course, a Britisher and a Tory. Now, according to that noble patriot Mayor Thompson, of Chicago, British Toryism is the greatest danger this country has to face. It must be perfectly evident to all 100 per cent Americans that the British Prime Minister put Mark Twain in his list of books as a mere bait to tempt them to read Dickens, whose "American Notes" are a burning scandal. This will make every true American distrustful of his literary advice in any respect. Let us turn from

him, then, to another statesman, an American liberal, with whom we shall probably be safer.

At about the date that the London "Times" reported Prime Minister Baldwin's attitude towards books and reading, the New York "Times" printed an interview with Senator Borah during which he gave some account of authors that have influenced him. He is not to be inveigled by the current vogue of the "best-seller." "At the risk of being called an old fogey," he said, "I still follow Carlyle's example and each time a new book is published I read an old one." He enjoys novels, but, as "the majority of modern novels might be better classified as text-books of physiology and psychology," he turns for relief to Hawthorne, in spite of his "morbidity;" to Balzac, in spite of his "monarchistic ideas;" to Dickens, in spite of the fact that "he is given a little too much to caricature;" and to Thackeray, in spite of his being "a little too English to appeal to a Middle Westerner."

For poetry Senator Borah turns to Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante, "whose works," he says, "I read and re-read so often that I can quote pages from them . . . ; so, you see, in some things I am not as radical as I am painted."

For imagination and humor Mr. Borah likes Swift, although he does not wholly approve of the cynicism of the author of the "Battle of the Books" and the "Tale of a Tub." But of all the authors he mentions Senator Borah evidently feels a greater sense of indebtedness to Emerson than to any other. In this admiration and gratitude his book-loving countrymen will join. Emerson's star is in the ascendant. The figure of the gentle, pungent, clear-thinking, truth-speaking sage of Concord is looming larger and larger as a man and artist on the stage of English litera-

