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## Books of Special Interest

### British Drama

THE CHIEF BRITISH DRAMATISTS.  
Edited by BRANDER MATTHEWS and  
PAUL ROBERT LIEDER. Boston: Hough-  
ton Mifflin Co. \$1925. \$5.

Reviewed by J. RANKEN TOWSE

THE compilers of this volume, whose names are a sufficient guarantee of their competency, may be said to have fairly accomplished their main purpose, which was to illustrate in brief compass the various stages of development in English dramatic literature from the Middle Ages to the close of the nineteenth century. Considering the limits of the space within which they were arbitrarily confined it was almost unnecessary for them, in their preface, to give a list of their unavoidable omissions. That their collection of plays, twenty-five in number, has been, as they say, very severely sifted, is obvious enough, but the operation has been conducted, on the whole, with notable shrewdness and judgment. And formidable, at first sight, as is the array of rejected authors, some of them of no little eminence, it may be remarked that the works of many of them are—for the ordinary reader at any rate—more curious than valuable as specimens either of drama or literature. Moreover the editors very wisely simplified their task, and forestalled possible objections by giving the preference to those plays which, in actual representation, had enjoyed the greatest and most enduring popularity. And this, after all, is no bad criterion to go by. In the theatre the sustained verdict of the mass is the surest foundation of fame. And it is well also to remember that the dramas, declared by critical intelligence to be the greatest of all time, have ever been the chief favorites of the general public.

This particular dramatic anthology is superior to many others because of the care that has been taken, in each instance, to secure the most authoritative text. On this account, notwithstanding its piece-meal character, it may be commended to the enthusiastic and conscientious student as well as to the less precise and fastidious reader. And most, if not all of the pieces selected—individual opinions may differ on this point—are generally conceded to be among the finest achievements of their respective creators. To discuss their merits seriatim at this time is neither possible nor needful. Whether even a careful perusal of them, as the editors fondly hope, will enable the average student to note the processes of dramatic evolution during the last four centuries, and the causes of them, may be doubtful, but he should at least be able to perceive the striking changes that have occurred in the literary quality, the methods of construction, the power of characterization and the use of imagination. The present writer is not inclined to think that the size or shape of the theatres or the personality of the actors had very much to do with any of them. That, however, is another matter.

In addition to an introductory chapter on ancient and modern theatres in England, which is interesting although it contains nothing new, this volume, which with its admirable print and thin but not transparent paper, is a fair example of modern bookmaking, offers, in its thousand pages, a rich choice of varied drama, from the Bome Abraham and Isaac down to "The Liars" of Henry Arthur James. Here are famous works of Marlowe, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Webster, Massinger, Wycherley, Dryden, Olway, Vanbrugh, Congreve, Sheridan, and other classics, and several of the more illustrious moderns. The whole makes a rich and varied feast. It seems a pity that room could not have been found for Tennyson's "Becket," although, to be sure, that could not be

counted among the long lived plays of its era. This solid and useful book is completed by an index containing notes on the plays and their authors, an index to characters and a reading list in the chief British dramatists.

### Three Little Tree Books

A GUIDE TO THE TREES. By CARLTON C. CURTIS. New York: Greenberg. 1925. \$1.50.

THE GIANT SEQUOIA. By R. S. ELLSWORTH. Oakland, Calif.: J. D. Berger. 1924.

THE FOREST GIANT. By ADRIEN LE-CORBEAU. New York: Harper & Bros. 1924. \$2.

Reviewed by NORMAN TAYLOR  
Brooklyn Botanic Garden

A MATEUR tree lovers and the immensely increased number of walkers will find Professor Curtis's book an invaluable little guide to our native trees. There are pictures of most of the kinds, and the author has found it necessary to use only a few of the terms which have driven many from more technical and exhaustive works. Not since Thompson-Sutton's "Foresters' Manual" for boy scouts, has there been such a judicious sifting of the unimportant and a thoroughly successful selection of the significant in tree identification. The book is wholly without literary style, unless it be the essence of style to crowd as much information into a small space as possible. Nearly all of this is correct, but experts will bemoan the inclusion of a few persistent old errors that have been carried through generations of tree books. But as the book is not for experts, it is a genuine pleasure to record the fact that no recent guide to our native trees should prove so satisfactory to amateurs as this one. It is thin and will slip into the pocket.

While Professor Curtis's book deals with the trees of northeastern America, both the other volumes have to do with a single species of conifer—the giant Sequoia—now confined to California. The ancient range of this now relict species was so extensive the fossil remains of it are common in many parts of the world.

The immense antiquity of Sequoia, stretching from the days of the dinosaurs to the present, has fired the enthusiasm of professional botanists from Asa Gray to dozens of lesser students of today. Paleobotanists, geologists, and various climatologists have wrung from its past history, and from these relict survivors in the Sierra Nevada, a story of almost incredible interest, a veritable drama of tree history.

Neither of the present volumes makes any pretense of adding to that story, both are frankly appreciations of its significance. Mr. Ellsworth's is more inclusive as to information than the Frenchman's book, but as a literary work it is as the writing of an enthusiastic sophomore against a master. Who Adrien LeCorbeau may be is wholly unknown to the average American reader, and the reviewer confesses never to have heard of him until recently. He has produced a little masterpiece of descriptive nature writing. Nothing since Maeterlinck's "Intelligence of the Flowers" has so caught the beauty and drama of plant life. Holes could easily be picked in some of his statements, but no scientist who lacks the magic of this author should pick them. It is doubtful if the general reader will retain one really significant error, such, for instance, as referring to the Sequoia as giant pines. But no one can finish this little book without capturing through the magic of the author's prose, some of the beauty and majesty of Sequoia.

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# The Scottish Renaissance

By EDWIN MUIR

It is not only a few people in England who are probably not suspected of Americanism; all that for about three years there has existed what has been termed a Scottish Renaissance. The beginnings of all movements are obscure; they only attain that burst of splendor which convinces the cultivated public after they have struggled on against opinion, against all reason, through a long and painful apprenticeship. In a renaissance has been published. It is "Sangstoo short to tell us anything of the movement which it should herald, too short also to justify the facile conclusion that it heralds none.

Recently a volume of poetry which claims to be the fruit of the Scottish Renaissance has been published. It is "Sangstoo short," by Mr. Hugh M'Diarmid. It is written in Scots, and it has the best of justifications; it is perfectly original. That is to say, it could have been written by no one but Mr. M'Diarmid, by no poet of any nationality other than the Scottish, and in no language save that language. It is even more unlike contemporary English poetry than that of Mr. Yeats and Mr. Russell, and it is as little as theirs parochial. Mr. M'Diarmid's intellectual competence cannot be gainsaid, nor his modernity, to use an awkward but necessary word. He is by no means a mere dialect poet, a successor of the host of sentimental rhymers who have written in all the dialects of Scots because they have not known any other language. He has chosen Scots, rather, as a serious vehicle for all that a writer may desire to express. He has partly chosen it, partly created it; for the language he uses is one derived from all the Scots dialects, a composite language. To experiment with speech in this wholesale way was hazardous; yet in the present state of Scottish letters it was necessary. There is an essential difference between literary language and spoken language; we can use naturally in poetry, for instance, words which in everyday speech would sound artificial. But in Scottish poetry since the time of Burns (whose Scots was really artificial, a composite language, like Mr. M'Diarmid's) there has been no literary language; the speech which the dialect poet, the village bard, has used for poetry has been the same which his neighbors used every day; and it is this primal limitation which has made his utterance invariably provincial: he has had no language for the order of experience with which poetry is chiefly concerned. There has been no Scottish literary instrument for over a century, no larger speech transcending the bounds of everyday speech, and capable of dealing with every variety of experience. In combining the riches of all the dialects and in using them purely with an eye for their literary values Mr. M'Diarmid has created for himself such a language. This language has not yet been tested on a grand scale, but to the extent to which it is used in this volume it is an adequate, natural, and original vehicle for what Mr. M'Diarmid has to say. This may turn out to be a fact of great importance for Scottish letters, if one may talk of an entity which at the moment scarcely exists. For if a Scottish literary language is possible then a Scottish literature is possible too.

The idea of a Scottish literary revival was first publicly advanced by Mr. M'Diarmid's friend and colleague, Mr. C. M. Grieve, about three years ago. It was associated at first in *The Scottish Nation*, a weekly journal, with a political policy of Home Rule for Scotland. *The Scottish Nation* was short-lived; the writers whom Mr. Grieve expected to arrive did not appear, and the public was cold. *The Scottish Chapbook*, a monthly miscellany of Scottish poetry, ran the same course and had to be discontinued at the same time. It was in the main very poor, and decisively below the level of even the worst English reviews; but it was redeemed by the occasional appearance of Mr. Grieve's prose, of poems by Mr. M'Diarmid, and of various contributions by Mr. G. R. Malloch. These represent thus far the net literary achievement of the Renaissance; other writers have appeared, but their performance has been no more than respectable, and often scarcely that. Of these three writers Mr. M'Diarmid is, I think, easily the most important, as he has been the last to emerge. The only

other figure of equal importance in the movement is the composer, Mr. F. G. Scott, who is attempting to do for his branch of art what Mr. M'Diarmid is trying to do for poetry. Mr. Scott's music has force, originality, wit, form; it is modern in technique, and Scottish in idiom; and it has an emphatic charm which is to be found in no other music written in the British Isles. It is as unlike contemporary English music, in other words, as Mr. M'Diarmid's poetry is unlike contemporary English poetry.

The renaissance has crystallized thus far, then, in Mr. Scott and Mr. M'Diarmid. Here I am concerned only with the latter. If Mr. M'Diarmid is the representative contemporary Scottish poet, how does his poetry compare with the English poetry of our time?

For purely descriptive purposes Mr. M'Diarmid's poems may be divided under four headings: the decorative, the mystical, the descriptive (*genre pieces*), and, most characteristic, perhaps, the curiously reflective. These divisions are not, of course, definite; the decorative poems are sometimes touched with mysticism, the decorative and descriptive alike are seldom entirely without a flash of the author's almost eccentric thought. One of the best of the decorative poems is this:

*Mars is braw in crammasy,  
Venus in a green silk gown,  
The auld mune shak's her gowden feathers,  
Their starry talk's a wheen o' blethers,  
Nane for thee a thochtie spairn',  
Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn!  
—But greet, an' in your tears ye'll drown  
The haill clanjamfrie!*

This poem is strangely felicitous; the mood, a fleeting one, is perfectly rendered; but Mr. M'Diarmid is more characteristic and I think more incontestably a poet in poems such as "Country Life."

*Ootside! . . . Ootside!  
There's dooks that try tae fly  
An' bum-clocks bizzin' by,  
A corn-scriech an' a cay  
An' guissay o' the cray.  
Inside! . . . Inside!  
There's golochs on the wa',  
A cradle on the ca',  
A muckle bleeze o' cones,  
An' mither fochin' scones.*

(It should be explained that bum-clocks are beetles, that guissay is pig, a goloch a cockroach, and so on.) Here it is an almost fantastic economy, a crazy economy which has the effect of humor and yet conveys a kind of horror, which makes this poem so original and so truly Scottish. It is a pure inspiration; nothing could be better of its kind, and the kind is rare. This vision is profoundly alien to the spirit of English poetry; the thing which resembles it most, outside other Scottish poetry, is perhaps the poetry of Villon. It is the product of a realistic, or more exactly a materialistic, imagination, which seizing upon everyday reality shows not the strange beauty which that sometimes takes on, but rather the beauty which it possesses normally and in use. There is in this perception of beauty less magic and less exaltation than in that of romantic poetry; but on the other hand it has more toughness, vigor, and fulness. The romantic note is of course often heard in Scottish poetry, and with supreme force in the Ballads, but it is this other note that is most essentially Scottish; it is this that sets aside the Ballads, the poetry of the Makars and of Burns, the prose of Carlyle and George Douglas, from the literatures of all other peoples, and gives these nationality and character. It is this note, too, that peculiarly characterizes Mr. M'Diarmid's poems.

How, then, does Mr. M'Diarmid compare with his English contemporaries? In curious speculation and half-fantastic thought he is certainly as original as Mr. Graves; his descriptions are more economical and, I think, more vivid than Mr. Blunden's, and his mysticism more organic with his general mood than Mr. de la Mare's. In the quality of his work he is not unworthy to be compared with these poets; but the question is whether he has a power, like theirs, of sustained imagination. This has still to be seen. Each of these poems is a single flash, vivid but brief. We wait for the further volume which will establish Mr. M'Diarmid's title to our most serious attention.

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