

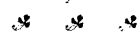
The Man and the Soil

PRAIRIE. By WALTER J. MUILENBURG. New York: The Viking Press, 1925. \$2.50 net.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

M. R. MUILENBURG belongs to the talented Iowa group which has given *The Midland* prominence as a literary monthly, and which includes Ruth Suckow, Roger L. Sergel, and John T. Frederick. All of these writers have followed their practice in short story writing by the publication of novels. "Prairie" has evident marks of kinship in its grim realistic method with Ruth Suckow's "Country People," Mr. Frederick's "Druid," and Mr. Sergel's "Arlie Gelston." These authors, like Mr. and Mrs. Haldeman-Julius a little earlier in their striking novel called "Dust," are intent upon picturing Middle Western farm life without softening one of its harsh lineaments; they find their essential dramatic material in the struggle between human character and the implacable rural environment; and they strike a general tragic note in showing how the environment warps and hardens their protagonists.

It is as a promising member of this school that Mr. Muilenburg now takes his place, and in his first book he adds a chamber to the composite edifice which the group is building. It is well worthy of a place beside "Country People." Its material has the veracity of close observation rather than of creative imagination; its handling shows careful workmanship and an artistic sense. Some critics will suggest that the artistry is derivative—that Mr. Muilenburg's book recalls Knut Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil." But the resemblance may be accidental. In essence the book is quite indigenous, and it represents a theme which has apparently long matured in the author's mind; part of it was suggested in a short story of the same title which he published in *The Midland* several years ago.



In outline "Prairie" is simplicity itself. It is the story of a pioneer, his wife, his child, alone on the plains—nothing else. Community life is rigidly excluded, and after the opening chapters no social contacts give richness to the action, or breadth to the background. By these limitations the author has laid himself open to the charge of starkness, but has given his tale a depth and intensity it otherwise would have lacked. The family of three, discordant but dominated by the father's iron will, fight out their battle with nature alone. They struggle with drought, burning suns, hailstorms, prairie fires, blizzards, and loneliness. The man conquers nature in the end, but it is a barren victory; he has his half section, but he has lost all that makes a farm worth having.

Unquestionably Mr. Muilenburg's real achievement lies in his portrait of this man. Elias Vaughn is partly explained by heredity. The son of a grim Calvinist farmer in Ohio—or is it Indiana?—he rebels against his father's harsh discipline, his isolation, his cheerless virtue. The boy is proud, self-willed, and eager for adventure. He also thinks himself in love with the timid, clinging daughter of a shiftless neighbor, whom his father despises. Breaking completely with his home, Elias marries Lizzie and sets out for the trans-Mississippi prairies. They buy their land off the railway and settle down fifteen miles from any settlement, the man eager and courageous, the girl fearful, homesick, and discontented. Then begins the lifelong struggle which completely breaks the woman, but which simply turns the man to steel; a pioneer with but one idea—to subdue the land, to keep on fighting, to stand independent of all help.

No defeats, hardships, or considerations of tenderness to his family can turn Elias back. His first crops are burned up by the hot dry summers, and exhausting his funds, he runs into debt. His neighbors give up and go back east. His first child sickens and dies. He himself ages rapidly in body and spirit, until the thrill of exultation that he once felt in his enterprise never even momentarily returns. Above all, his wife fails him. She pines in her weak, dispirited way for a land of shade and companionship, and her health fails. All her affection for her husband, all her companionship with him, disappear, and they come almost to hate each other. Finally Elias discovers that it is not her body alone that the prairie has undermined. He has taken her and their boy Joey to the nearest hamlet to buy some much-needed articles:

A woman had come into the store and stood leaning

against the counter, looking at the newcomer, and smiling at the woman before her who was running her hands over a piece of bright red cloth. For a moment the blood mounted to his head so that he was dizzy with anger. The veins stood out on his forehead. He quickly walked up to his wife. The clerk, who saw that he had noticed her action, looked fearfully at him and became cringingly civil.

But nothing daunts or deters Elias. His half-crazed and wholly miserable wife finally dies. Already his son Joey, growing up to detest the farm, its toil, and its poverty, has quarreled with his father even as Elias had quarreled with his own sire; Joey goes to town, and promptly becomes a dissipated loafer. The pioneer farmer is left utterly alone, without even a friend. But then he had always been lonely, and only the contest with the soil had given his life meaning. That contest, as the novel closes, he has won—he is a prosperous landholder in a community that has now become both prosperous and populous. But the ending is essentially tragic.

Now this story of what the prairie and pioneer do to each other is truthful, gripping, and in some passages powerful. It is also narrow, stiff, and depressing. Once the author's intention is grasped by the reader, its execution grows a little mechanical.



Cartoon of Trollope in *Vanity Fair*, from "The Significance of Anthony Trollope," by Spencer Van Bokkelen Nichols. (Douglas C. McMurtrie)

We feel that many incidents are invented to develop a set formula. There are several scenes that are finely faithful to Western life and human nature—the clumsy Christmas celebration in the Vaughn's little cabin, the trip of Lizzie back home, the school entertainment; but there are other scenes, including a final quarrel between father and son, that are labored and unconvincing. The book is lacking in the fusion that a complete fervent inspiration might give it. Into the author's feeling for the soil there enters an element of true poetry, and his natural descriptions are admirable; but as a whole the novel lacks the enkindling touch. Nor does the novel succeed in expressing quite as much of Western life as it might. There is evidence that the author intended his pioneer family to represent a type, and he calls Elias frequently "the man," Lizzie "the woman." But there is nothing typical in either their characters or—taken as a whole—in their lives. The book cannot be called a novel of the first order. But it is a durable contribution to the literature of the West, a work which deserves a wide reading, and one which justifies high expectations of the author's future.

M. Leon Pierre-Quint has published the first complete work on Marcel Proust (Kra),—a study of the novelist from birth to death, with numerous unpublished letters and anecdotes, and a clarifying exposition of his works.

The Don Juan of the East

THE TALE OF GENJI. By LADY MURASAKI. Translated from the Japanese by ARTHUR WALEY. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1925. \$3.

Reviewed by KATHARINE SERGEANT ANGELL

ARTHUR WALEY in his preface to his translation of "The Tale of Genji," assigns this novel written more than nine hundred years ago by Murasaki Shikibu to a place among the dozen greatest masterpieces of the world. The listing of masterpieces is an uncertain and not too constructive occupation and it would be unfortunate to put "Genji" for English readers into the category of books which must be read from duty. For "Genji" is wholly a delight. It brings sheer happiness by its truth, beauty, humor, its understanding of humanity and zest for life, its admirable richness of texture.

The most detailed of the three journals in "The Diaries of the Court Ladies of Old Japan," (translated in 1920 by Annie Omori and Professor Doi) is by Murasaki Shikibu and of her Amy Lowell in her preface to this volume, has written that "with a flash from a mind of genius" she conceived the idea for the first time in Japanese literature, that people like to read about themselves. Certainly Murasaki is a realist as she conveys to us her court world, her polished civilization, so ancient and remote, at the same time so singularly modern in its essentials. Yet in her novel realism is less remarkable than her power of telling a tale of love and adventure and of touching it with color and emotion, with the essence of atmosphere or mood that transcends realism. "The Tale of Genji" is the Don Juan legend of the Orient. Prince Genji, the illegitimate son of the Emperor and a great favorite with his father, was of a surpassing beauty, skilled in all the arts of a prince, a dancer whose performance always brought tears to the eyes of his audience, a clever poet, a great lover,—"it was inevitable that he should cause a certain amount of suffering." "But in reality the . . . lous, commonplace, straight-ahead amours of companions did not in the least interest him, . . . was a curious trait in his character that when rare occasions, despite all resistance, love did gain a hold upon him, it was always in the most improbable and hopeless entanglement that he became involved." We are told of at least eight of these entanglements in this volume (which contains only nine chapters of the fifty odd of the novel) and each of these romantic adventures has a delicate loveliness that carries conviction and justification, each sheds a new light on the complicated and sensitive nature of Genji.



It is perhaps not extraordinary, in an era and civilization when sex was treated with uncomplicated frankness and decent simplicity that it was a woman who wrote the Don Juan legend of the East, but surely it is a mark of genius that Murasaki, a woman, can write of a man like Genji with understanding and sympathy, with humor without bitterness and tenderness without sentimentality. Indeed Murasaki must be ranked as one of the women who have written best about men. Early in the book Genji and two other young courtiers discuss the qualities to be desired in a wife. The zealous housewife, the blue stocking, the jealous one who "must needs be forever mounting guard over their own and their husbands' affection" are pronounced equally unsatisfactory, "but she whose tolerance and forgiveness knows no bounds, though this may seem to proceed from the beauty and amiability of her disposition, is in fact displaying the shallowness of her feeling." They finally decide that "despite all our picking, sifting, and comparing we shall never succeed in finding this in all ways adorable and impeccable female."

There is a constant almost masculine robustness and matter of fact quality in Murasaki's comments on both men and women, and she had a delight, akin to Jane Austen's, in noting absurdities of character or manners. Might not this be Jane Austen? "One expects elderly scholars to be somewhat odd in their movements and behavior, and it was amusing to see the lively concern with which the Emperor watched their various and always uncouth and erratic methods of approaching the Throne." The personality of Murasaki that emerges from the diary and the novel is after all not unlike the Jane

Austen who "collected" men and women on paper but shunned the neighbors at home. Especially in the diary we see Murasaki at court, where in her later years she was lady-in-waiting to Queen Akiko, dreading court functions, feeling shy and gauche in the presence of fine feathers, yet commenting with spirit on every detail of dress, manners, and behavior. And in the diary she writes "I see that I have been slighted, hated, and looked down upon as an old gossip, and I must bear it, for it is my destiny to be solitary. The Queen said once, 'You were ever mindful not to show your soul.'"

Not to her companions at court but to the readers of her word is Murasaki's soul visible, and the dry wit with which the writing is punctuated does not by any means set the mood of "The Tale of Genji." The dominating quality of the novel is of a deep savoring beauty, at times seen in a passionate eagerness for life, or again permeated by a dream quality of loveliness more intimated than conveyed. It is extraordinary what variety of mood and atmosphere Genji's loves assume. They run the gamut from his grotesque affair with a "prodigiously old and tottering," painted and bedizened lady of fifty-seven, or his half-pitying, half-annoying pursuit of the inarticulate, awkward tragic "Saffron Flower" to the exquisiteness and delicacy of his love for the child named like the author, Murasaki, she whose hair grew in "cloudy masses over her temples" or "fell across her cheeks in two great waves of black." The little girl is first seen against the background of hermitage and temple in the haze of the northern hills, with "the strange and lovely forms" of mists in the valley, and the roar of waterfalls against "the somnolently rising and falling, monotonous chanting of the scriptures." Each adventure has thus a place and color as individual as the setting of a Conrad short story, yet there are on the whole but few passages of description. Murasaki had the typical Japanese gift of concentrated imagery without any of the constriction of narrative sweep that such concentration may give.

Arthur Waley's translation of "The Tale of Genji" is in an English prose of rare grace; it is so brilliant that one is even tempted to wonder how much of the style we owe to Murasaki, how much to her translator. But it is sufficient for us fortunate occidentals that we have here had opened to us, to store in our affections, a book which adds to the permanent enrichment of life.

"A Persistent Fire"

OUT OF THE PAST. By MARGARET SYMONDS. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1925. \$4.00.

Reviewed by ARNOLD WHITRIDGE

IT is just thirty years since the death of John Addington Symonds. The standard biography by his friend, Horatio Brown, gives an excellent picture of him as a man of letters. It has remained for his daughter, Margaret Symonds, to portray the peculiar charm of his family life. Miss Symonds, who is now Mrs. W. W. Vaughan, wife of the headmaster of Rugby, has contrived to tell us just what we want to know without boring us with mere chit-chat. As its name suggests, "Out of the Past" is more of a medley of letters and reminiscences than a regular biography. This sort of book, of which the Victorian age has been very fruitful, goes far to prove Comte's theory that society is composed of families and not of individuals. If the Symonds family had not been made up of very delightful people these reminiscences would have been merely trivial. As it is, they go far towards explaining the large humanity of John Addington Symonds which endeared him to people so widely different as Dr. Jowett of Balliol and Walt Whitman.

After a brilliant career at Oxford which was cut short by a complete nervous breakdown Symonds was forced to go abroad for his health. Eventually, after gallant but unsuccessful attempts to withstand the rigors of the English climate, he settled with his family in the mountain valley of Davos Platz. In the eighteen seventies Switzerland had not yet become the playground of Europe, and the sudden appearance of an Englishman with all his lures and penates was something of an event. Symonds at once endeared himself to the inhabitants by plunging into the life of the community. He became the friend and almost the oracle of the peasants for miles around, entering into their life with a freedom and intimacy that would have been

impossible in England. There was of course a certain amount of English society. In 1879 Robert Louis Stevenson, also ordered South for his health, arrived at Davos with his wife and stepson. These two men both abounding in vitality and both struggling against ill-health found much in common. In his essay on "Talk and Talkers" Stevenson describes Symonds as "a man of various and exotic knowledge, complete though unready sympathies, and fine full discriminative flow of language. . . even wisdom comes from his tongue like singing."

At the same time that Symonds was making friends with farmers and innkeepers and spending golden hours with Stevenson he was always at work on his studies of the Renaissance. Often these literary labors necessitated a trip to Italy and the whole family including M. Berard, the temperamental chef who threw knives at the kitchenmaids and wrote exquisite odes of apology afterwards, would migrate to Venice. In this atmosphere of strenuous work and no less strenuous play the children grew up, getting such education as they could glean from an occasional governess and the constant society of their gifted parents. We gather that Mrs. Symonds was no less remarkable in her way than her husband. She contributed a zest for beauty and an indifference to academic standards of culture that effectually preserved the family from any professorial tendency. What we try to attain by lecture courses the Symonds family imbibed as naturally as they did the air of the mountains. In those benighted days the word self-expression was probably unknown in the vocabulary of education, but the personality of John Addington Symonds was a perpetual incentive to literary or artistic ambition. He was one of those invalids who work body and brain to the uttermost and yet derive fierce satisfaction from the resulting exhaustion. Everything that he wrote, especially his books on the Renaissance and the "Life of Michael Angelo," was written from the heart as well as from the head. A pedantic Dry-as-Dust may be interested in the Borgias or in Walt Whitman but it requires the buoyancy of spirit of a John Addington Symonds to be an enthusiast for both. The enforced exile in Switzerland bred in him a sympathy with all kinds of people that he might never have acquired if his health had allowed him to remain at Oxford as Fellow of Magdalen. Whitman's own words about him could hardly be bettered. "Symonds," he writes, "is a persistent fire; he never quails nor lowers his colors. . . He is cultivated enough to break—bred to the last atom—overbred; yet he has remained human, a man in spite of all."

Ripe Reflections

THE SCHOOL FOR AMBASSADORS, AND OTHER ESSAYS. By J. J. JUSSELAND. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1925.

Reviewed by ARTHUR W. COLTON.

"THE only connecting link between these essays," M. Jusserand remarks, "is the pen that wrote them." But they have more connection than being by that pen necessarily implies. It is a pen that has been active in two different ways. M. Jusserand is not only a distinguished man of practical affairs in a world of today, but a man of distinguished learning in respect to things of long ago, and this book is all from the pen of the scholar. The schooling of ambassadors is not by precepts drawn from his own diplomatic experience, but from treatises on the profession, mainly of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, manuals and definitions of the perfect ambassador that seem to require improbable perfections and extraordinary attainments. Ambassadors, indeed, of such ranging knowledge beyond the strictly professional as M. Jusserand and Lord Bryce must always have been unusual.

The second essay pictures the aged Petrarch, kind, querulous, and fastidious, in his retreat at Arquà, dreaming of Rome once more leading the world, Latin replacing all other languages, and himself remembered, not as a sonneteer and trifler with vulgar tongues, but as a great Latin poet, the author of "Africa."

The third is on the technical question: Where was the "Saint Treigneu ou pais de Gales," visited by Master Regnault Girard in 1434? Apparently it was not in Wales, but in Scotland, the shrine of St. Ninian.

The fourth tells the story of the city of Sab-

bioneta (near Mantua), which was built by Duke Vespaziano Gonzaga for his glory and pleasure, and thereafter faded away like a flower.

The fifth is on Ronsard and his native country around Vendôme; and the proof that "Cassandre" was not a poetical lay figure, but a lady of that name, who married the Lord of Pré and became the ancestress of Alfred de Musset, leaving Ronsard to carry "a life long hunger in his heart"—

L'absence, ni Poubli, ni la course du jour
N'ont effacé le nom, les grâces, ni l'amour
Qu'au cœur je m'imprimai des ma jeunesse tendre.

The sixth essay treats of Tennis, the game as played boisterously in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the word as derived from "Tenez!" equivalent to "Get ready!" or, as we say, "Play!"

The seventh, eighth, and ninth essays are on Shakespeare.

✱ ✱ ✱

The theory of the unknowable Shakespeare—"others abide our question; thou art free"—is, in fact, more legendary than tenable. The portrait of the man in the essay, "Ben Jonson on Shakespeare's Art," is much the same as in E. A. Robinson's poem, "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford." It is consistent, definite, and well documented. Ben Jonson found him puzzling, lovable, exasperating, his method and practice of their common art all wrong by the test of right theory, but the outcome marvelously better than it should be,—an exasperating fact. He was Jonson's counterpart and antithesis in most ways: romantic in his plays and bourgeois in his life, Jonson conservative in his plays and romantic in his life. Things flowed out of him like water from a fountain, and Jonson took infinite pains to results that were stiff with artifice. He was mild, peaceable, reasonable, reserved, and Jonson boisterous, quarrelsome, open, and dogmatic. There was something subtle and sequestered about him, something of a mystery to those who knew him well, but he was as definitely a character as Jonson himself about whom there was very little mystery. Such a man is a curious problem to his best friends, but he is no featureless shadow even to us. How he struck his contemporaries is fairly evident. He preferred an uneventful life as the background of his powers, of his ranging and brooding mind. He preferred private life to public. He valued an independent income and the respect of his "home town" more than his literary immortality. They are any rate of a less impalpable substance. After all the fact of one's being is of more curious interest, and perhaps of more importance, than any accident of accomplishment. "Ben, what's immortal," more

Than a small oblivion of compeet ashes,
That of a dream-addicted world was once
A moving atomy.

Speaking of Shakespeare's retirement in his later years, M. Jusserand, perhaps with a touch of personal feeling or even of personal application, remarks that those later plays, such as "A Winter's Tale," were written probably in Stratford; that they show the quieting influence of retirement, and the equanimity of the sane mind preparing to leave men as a friend of men, and existence with gratitude for all it has brought of happiness, *remerciant son hôte*.

M. Jusserand on his departure left us with this courteous gesture and this farewell gift, the work of a ripe scholar who walks the paths of learning like a gentleman in his garden, enjoying the effortless ease of his erudition and "the equanimity of a sane mind."

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY Editor
WILLIAM ROSE BENET Associate Editor
AMY LOVEMAN Associate Editor
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY Contributing Editor

Published weekly by Time, Inc., Briton Hadden, President. Henry S. Canby, Vice-President; Henry R. Luce, Secretary-Treasurer, 25 West 45th Street, New York, N. Y. Subscription rate, per year, postpaid: In the U. S. and Mexico, \$3; in Canada, \$3.50; in Great Britain, 16 shillings; elsewhere, \$4. For advertising rates, address Noble A. Cathcart, Advertising Manager, 25 West 45th Street, New York. Circulation Manager, Roy E. Larsen. Entered as second-class matter July 29, 1924, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Vol. II. No. 6.

Copyright, 1925, by The Saturday Review Co., Inc.