

History in Masquerade

REVELRY. By SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS. New York: Boni & Liveright. \$2.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

"REVELRY" describes itself, perhaps for prudential reasons, as "a novel of the time just beyond our own day;" which is correct, if you look backward. It is the story of the golden prime of good old Warren Harding, of the oil scandals, the Veterans' Bureau thieveries, the Ohio gang. The publishers' jacket is having its little joke in suggesting that "twelve persons will be identified with each man and woman in the book;" the informed reader of the newspapers will have no trouble in identifying all of them (except one or two pure inventions added for the sake of the plot) although Mr. Adams has used the fiction writer's privilege of alteration and combination as his needs require.

He has taken no more liberties with the facts, and the rumors, than historical novelists are constantly taking in writing about periods a little more remote. Nobody would criticize the method if he were dealing with Charlemagne, or Louis XIV, or Napoleon III; but because the material is fresh a great many people will accuse him of bad taste, especially after Republican zealots have started the mob scene. It is not bad taste to steal everything loose around Washington, but it is bad taste (so one was copiously assured in 1924) to call attention to it. Mr. Adams, however, is an old *Sun* man, indoctrinated with the *Sun* tradition that whatever God permits to happen (even the *Sun* had to pretend to believe in God, in the days when this phrase was coined) is fit to print.

It is true that the incidents of the story include not only verified facts, but some matters which are still *sub judice*; and juries being what they are, their verdict may not accord with that of history. There is also a good deal that was Washington gossip, but never found its way into the record, for reasons which did not always reflect on its credibility. And there are some incidents which are pure invention for the sake of the plot—an action plot, including two murders, two or three love affairs, and a Presidential suicide.

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There will be disagreement as to the propriety of such a commingling of fact, fiction, and more or less unverified hypothesis. But, as observed above, it is the traditional method of the historical novel. Men who make history should expect to see their doings, and the surmises to which their behavior gave rise, set down in print. Some of us are old-fashioned enough to hold that the men whose actions gave Mr. Adams his inspiration do not come into court with clean enough hands to complain about any small embellishments that may have been added by the fiction writer.

And what a magnificent store of material it is, the whole glittering, grotesque, sordid, and obscene spectacle of these states in the twenty-ninth presidential (no more than a spectacle, unhappily, for though it may turn the stomach of the earnest patriot the general public agreed to look on it as a good show and nothing more). It is enough to tempt any author—and yet there have been not more than three or four authors in history who could do it justice. Aristophanes, Petronius, Rabelais—who are unhappily defunct. Several young men have lately nominated themselves as the Petronii of our time, but none of them found a second for his motion; many called themselves but few were chosen. Even Mark Twain was only moderately successful in turning our previous Gilded Age into fiction. Only the very greatest satirists could deal adequately with the Harding administration—and Mr. Adams has had the rare modesty to realize that he is not a great satirist, and the rare judgment to refrain, accordingly, from trying to be a satirist at all.

He has done more than that. The publishers' jacket does him grave injustice in calling "Revelry" a big novel. America is short on satirists, great or small, but it simply crawls with writers of big, large, great, stupendous, vital, or significant novels. One can think of twenty American authors who, confronted with the Harding administration, would be unable to refrain from writing a great novel about it—an interpretative novel, which should correlate that outbreak of grand and petty larceny with the movement of history and the spirit of the time.

Well, there is undoubtedly a great novel in the material—a truly great novel, not a great novel as the phrase is understood today; but it would take a truly great novelist to get it out. The name does not come to mind at the moment. Mr. Adams has had the wisdom to perceive that in these times a non-great novel has a scarcity value, and has contented himself with using the material to make a good story.

To this reviewer he seems to deserve more praise for what he has refrained from doing than for what he has actually done; his material is too good, so good that there is little to be done with it. Much of the book seems an old story because one has already read it all in the newspapers. What was evidently the chief interest of the author will probably be the chief interest of the reader as well—the character study of President Willis Markham; "torpid, good-humored, complacent, friendly, indulgent to himself, obliging to others, as loyal as a Samurai, full of party piety, a hater of the word 'No,' faithful to his own code of private honor, reliable, and as standardized as a Ford car." There is a good deal of pathos in the picture of the struggle of a third-rate intelligence with the duties of the Presidency, grown too great for even a first-rate intelligence; in his sigh of relief when he can come back to the accustomed ease of the friendly poker game with the old gang; and in the occasional outbursts of rage when this slow-witted man who trusted his friends but was honest according to his dim lights discovered what his friends were really doing.

The picture of the President who was too small for his job is done with genuine sympathy, and even his grafting friends are treated with detachment; though the remark that a certain woman was "vain as only blondes fighting the approach of forty can be" sounds like a mean dig at somebody. If there is a villain in the story it is the great sap public. Mr. Adams agrees with Miss Millay; the audience will forget. It has forgotten already.

But leaving moral reprobation to the future (the present being obviously uninterested) there is a good story here, and if it fails of absorbing interest the reason is only that to newspaper readers it is already familiar. And at any rate Mr. Adams deserves the Pulitzer prize for Modesty; he is that rarest of feathered creatures, the angel who fears to tread.

A Rip Van Winkle Town

THE FIDDLER IN BARLY. By ROBERT NATHAN. New York: Robert M. McBride & Co. 1926. \$2.

Reviewed by CHARLES E. NOYES

MOST of the contemporary American novelists are possessed of a consuming desire to be great. In their interesting and sometimes noteworthy failures, unfortunately, authors of more merit but lesser pretensions are apt to be buried. It is unfortunate, also, that the admirers of such an author, to make themselves heard, must cry superlatives which do not entirely become him, which tend to convey the impression that he is merely another of the innumerable superlatively praised literary lights.

Robert Nathan is not of his generation in any sense which makes comparison possible, although he is undoubtedly affected by the *zeitgeist*. He has received favorable notice because he writes well, from the standpoint of classical as well as of impressionistic criticism; and because he has enough both of personality and ability to make important the material which he uses. He is read by a few who care to appreciate delicacy and restraint which do not depend upon neurasthenically repressed passions for their effectiveness, but he has not yet been found by any large portion of his potential audience. In "The Fiddler in Barly," he offers a fourth novel charming equally with the others.

As usual, he makes use of a style which is quiet, careful, precise. Not pervading, but like fluted columns holding it to a level of fine urbanity, are passages of subdued humor. This, for example, with the setting a small church:

But Mr. Shrub, the postmaster, saw something else: he saw the letters which came to them, now and then, from other places. A letter from far away did a queer thing to a man; it gave him a secret. Mr. Shrub saw the hills around Barly, and beyond that, other hills—hills, plains, rivers, all the way across the world. It made his heart beat to think of so many places where he'd be a stranger. Not wishing to think about such things in church, he bowed his head, and thought about heaven instead. He was more at home there; there was nothing strange about heaven.

The story concerns itself with the inhabitants of a Rip Van Winkle town, their individual affairs, the reactions between them and a pantheistic fiddler who becomes hired man for the town's widow. In this isolated setting, things of importance are a love affair between the minister's daughter and the organist, the disillusion of a child who worships the minister's daughter, the postmaster's baffled desire to travel. The fiddler himself is an actor who has played previously the parts of the schoolmaster in "Autumn," of "The Puppet Master," and of Naaman in "Jonah." He is again a different character in his new rôle, but he brings to it remembrance of the others. He is still a romantic poet who does not quite succeed at his self-imposed task of taking the world as it is, but he has now attained, after all, some joy of life. He has occasionally to talk philosophically to keep his courage up.

He carries very well the *leit-motif* of all of Mr. Nathan's novels. While he may overcapitalize the ideas of Youth and Age, of Love and Beauty, he is possessed of that rare compassion which has in it no contemptuous pity. The other characters have most actually youth or age, love and beauty, and in their presence he is superb.

This same *motif* is executed harmoniously, in a lesser key, by his dancing dog Musket, and the members of the barnyard society. Batholomew, the cock, has a magnificent climax which coincides with, and motivates, the climax of the book.

The Press Boss Unveiled

SAVIOURS OF SOCIETY. By STEPHEN McKENNA. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1926. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN GRAHAM

THE long extracts from Browning's "Prince Hohenstich-Schwangau at the heads of the chapters of Stephen McKenna's new novel make the book look dull. For the later Browning was very tedious. But his "Saviours of Society" is better than Browning's poem and is in fact a very good novel.

Its subject is the Newspaper Chief, a variant of Arnold Bennett's "Lord Raingo." It is curious how much fiction of this kind London has produced this fall. Even Wells's "William Chissold with his brother's religion of publicity is concerned with the same type of pseudo-hero. McKenna has thought fit to portray the late Lord Northcliffe and call him Ambrose Sheridan. An unkind fate has forced a fastidious young writer who evidently loathed Northcliffe to duplicate the Napoleon of Carmelite street lovingly in the imagination.

It is a psychological study but it follows Lord Northcliffe's life closely, stopping short abruptly without going on to his madness and death. A vulgar, impulsive, full-blooded man not touched to fine issues, but possessed of body and nerve superior to that of most of his rivals, Sheridan romps to power in easy-going modern England. He is not a man of genius, but through the accident of modern commercial valuation his personality gets multiplied by his newspapers and by his wealth. In England a man who has a million is automatically considered greater than a man who has half a million. In fact it is easier for a business man to make a reputation of greatness over there than it is here. Selfridge is a genuinus, *vide* H. G. Wells; Lever on a pyramid of Sunlight-Soap used to be thought a super man. But in truth Selfridge is only equal to Wanamaker, and Lord Leverhulme being dead and already forgotten is considerably less than our Mr. Colgate.

Ambrose Sheridan, like Lord Northcliffe, found himself exalted above his station and still craved for power and thought of himself as a Napoleon. He had a very charming wife, though even Molly Northcliffe was hardly such an angel as Laura Sheridan. He was childless, wanted an heir, wanted to found a dynasty, and he had various affairs outside of matrimony.

The best of "Saviours of Society" is the portrayal of the women in it. There are two good women—the neglected wife, Laura, and the desired wife-to-be, Aureol. Aureol's mother is also cleverly indicated. McKenna shows himself less cynical than he is by reputation and allows his feminine characters to win one's heart in an old fashioned way. The love and self-sacrifice of Laura is unusual and appealing and when she offers to put herself in the wrong and be divorced as an unfaithful woman one cannot help

being moved even if remaining a little incredulous. The immature but brilliant Aureol is very real—and very attractive.

Only the politicians in the book are a little unconvincing. There is too much beefsteak in them. Their mind and their political morals are mediocre. No real men oppose Ambrose Sheridan and for that reason the reader is indulgent to him. He escapes condemnation. There is no one, not even Mr. Baldwin, who is a great moral force in English life. But were Ambrose Sheridan trying to thwart an Abraham Lincoln or anyone with authority of character or real genius he would at once look like a great villain.

The book ends like a sliced film, on a very problematical situation and no indication of a solution is given. I am inclined to think that Ambrose Sheridan would have saved no one, neither his girl-love, nor his mistress, nor his wife, nor society. The novel is sardonically entitled "Saviours of Society."

Huxley of the High Hand

JESTING PILATE: AN INTELLECTUAL HOLIDAY. By ALDOUS HUXLEY. New York: George H. Doran Company. 1926. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MONTGOMERY BELGION

MR. HUXLEY has been playing at Carrie Nation with the world for his oyster-bar. Those who, on the evidence of his novels and stories, have got him docketed as cynical, disgusted, disillusioned, devoid of ideals, not to mention "sophisticate" and "enervate" (the indigenes hereabouts, have you noticed? have taken to dropping their d's, perhaps to avoid damping their flow of prose), will have to change the label. They should have pondered his journalism more seriously. At any rate it is easy to discern now that "On the Margin" and "Along the Road" were harbingers of the metamorphosis that has resulted in this book. But he has gone further than those works ever led one to expect. In them, forsooth, he was often high hat; now, however, he uses the high hand. He rides over the world roughshod. He has developed a prodigious, a portentous "moral earnestness."

Those who like to harken to a good scold need not read any further; they may hasten at once to the bookstore where they will find this volume admirably printed on good paper but outrageously lacking an index.

Meanwhile, for the less urgently masochistic, I will continue. The qualities that have endeared Mr. Huxley to his far too restricted public are here in full measure. Among these qualities are:

First, a habit of saying either (a) exactly what the reader already believes or (b) exactly the opposite of what the reader believes. It doesn't matter whether it is (a) or (b): the result is equally satisfying. Whether, for instance, the reader thinks of the Taj Mahal as a wedding cake in marble or whether he (or she) considers it to be a sample of those Pearly Gates of which St. Peter is the guardian, Mr. Huxley's reflections on it will supply a quantitatively identical thrill.

Second, an air of erudition. I don't mean Mr. Huxley hasn't real erudition, but it is paraded with an air, and it is that air which is so charming. Here again it matters little whether or not the reader is familiar with the Euripidean chorus, Aristophanes's "Frogs," Racine, Callot's etchings, Scaliger and Bentley, Palladio's Rotonda at Vicenza, the *Hibbert Journal*, William of Tyre, Niccolo Pisano, the poem "Don Leon," Marco Polo, Edgar Allan Poe, Claude le Lorrain, or Dryden and "The Custom of the Country." It doesn't matter whether he imagines Callot to be a dressmaker and Bentley a maker of motor-cars. The ignorant and the learned alike will find Mr. Huxley's manner of referring to all these irresistibly captivating.

Third, a sense of humor. This is particularly Mr. Huxley's own, but once a taste for it has been acquired, it is, like a taste for hashish, insatiable. He is the only Anglo-Saxon one can think of who can make a Gallic joke with an easy Gallic abstention from grossness.

But here these qualities are merely the tiger's purr, Carrie's muff concealing the hatchet. Here Mr. Huxley reveals himself as a stern Mentor and Tele-machus, the poor world, gets it in the cervical vertebrae every time. "To travel," he says on page 241, "is to discover that everybody is wrong," and, by heck! he means it.

See America first. America began for Mr. Huxley far beyond the Pacific, at Worldpeace, a burg in Batavia. He was surprised to find the world, the western world, and peace thus so amicably juxtaposed. For the western world, in the shape of films from Hollywood, seemed to him so imbecile as to justify "the Javanese in rising and murdering every white man they met." Hollywood, he concluded in short, was further lowering the white man's already sunken prestige. America continued in Manila: nine reporters had interviewed Mr. Huxley within three hours of his arrival. It reappeared at Kyoto, Japan, "two or three hundred times as large as any possible Wild Western original" of a mining camp. He crossed the Pacific in an American ship: clickings like the telling of beads could be heard taking place behind cabin-doors—the rattle of ice, it was—and the legacy of Faraday and Clerk Maxwell he found employed to let the passengers learn on the first morning out from Yokohama that "Mrs. X, girl wife of Dr. X, aged 79, had been arrested for driving her automobile along the railroad track, whistling like a locomotive."

Yet San Francisco provided a shock: he gave the reporters his prejudices on the English general strike; in print he found his views completely reversed. From a mild laborite he had been converted into a vociferous yea-sayer for Mr. Baldwin. Then Los Angeles, the City of Dreadful Joy, the miles of films in process of manufacture, the announcements of the rival religious sects "advertising the spiritual wares that they would give away, or sell on the Sabbath;" Baptists with a Giant Marimaphone, Methodists with carnations, Congregationalists with Jackie Coogan, Advanced Thoughts with Miss Leila Castberg, Evangelists with "an old-fashioned revival;" Los Angeles with the gargantuan profusion of its restaurants, and between the succulent courses flappers and young men dancing, "clasped in an amorous wrestle;" Los Angeles with its great canticle, *Taedium laudamus!* Then Chicago's telephone directory and meditations on Mr. Veal, the undertaker trying to make himself the equal of "a physician, mathematician, academician, politician—not to mention Titian" by calling himself a mortician. Finally New York, where Mr. Huxley studied the contemporary drama, "The Cradle Snatchers" (Wyckley without the wit), "Sex" (living up to its simple name), &c.

But India catches it just as hot. The architecture of Bombay, the Mogul gardens—Shalimar and Nishat Bagh—the Kashmiris' habits, the yellow-robed holy man on the way from Peshwar to Lahore, Hindu art generally, the Thermopylean behavior of the delegates to the Cawnpore Congress, Hindu "spirituality" ("the primal curse of India"), Cawnpore medical advertisements, the Serpent which tried to swallow the sun at Benares before 1,000,000 pilgrims, "The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma"—all come in for their share of condemnation.

The result is a unique travel book. No chunks of Paterine prose lavished on sunrise in the Red Sea or seasickness off the Golden Gate, but all the time Mr. Huxley hammering in his views. To the elect I would particularly recommend the fourth entry under Delhi, the second under Labuan, the tenth under Cawnpore, the third under Calcutta, the one under Chicago, and of course the story of the elephant (second under Jaipur).

It is not that Mr. Huxley teaches one anything new. The title of the book is the fifth and sixth words of Bacon's essay, "Of Truth." The author implies that he has not stopped to find truth. But of course he had it before he started. He admits as much in conclusion when he says that the two new convictions with which he returned he had had at his departure. There is something more stimulating than this conclusion on page 170; "Fixity is appalling. It is better, it seems to me, to be destroyed, to become something unrecognizably different, than to remain forever intact and the same, in spite of altering circumstance." But, again, the late Mr. Keats had already said this, perhaps putting it even better, when he wrote in 1819: "Better be imprudent movables than prudent fixtures."

No, it is Mr. Huxley's inimitable "moral earnestness" that is novel. And to those who have watched his literary career with interest, with excitement, this "moral earnestness" may be more than prodigious, it may be indeed a portent.

A Critic of Style

THE OUTLOOK FOR AMERICAN PROSE.

By JOSEPH WARREN BEACH. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1926. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ERNEST BOYD

THE author of "The Method of Henry James" and of "The Technique of Thomas Hardy" needed no recommendation to me when this volume of his collected critical essays was announced. Professor Beach was firmly established in my esteem as a critic of real ability, and when I heard that these essays were to be largely concerned with the question of style in contemporary American prose, I anticipated that combination known in the hackneyed phrase as "amusement and instruction," a combination less familiar than the phrase. I confess to having been vastly amused, but the instruction has consisted chiefly in making me wonder how the admirations expressed in this book can be reconciled with the discernment and scholarship in the two previous works.

All discussions of style have led to mighty argument and much difference of opinion. "Stylist, heal thyself" has often been the retort of those who have ventured, in a style intolerable to others, to animadvert upon the subject in general or upon the particular style of certain authors. In this respect, at least, no charge lies against Professor Beach, for he writes a clear, unaffected prose, driving home his points, and adding a leaven of humor for good measure. Nor will many dispute his contention that Joseph Hergesheimer, Theodore Dreiser, and other American writers of the first rank, actually use words ignorantly, and constantly construct sentences which defy logic and grammar. What is it, then, that takes away from this sound criticism all its critical value?

Frankly, it is the incredible lack of standards which Mr. Beach reveals through his enthusiasms. So long as he is showing the defects in a writer's syntax and pleading for educated, unaffected prose, his is unimpeachable. But when he begins by talking of the "cleverness" of a journalist who adopts the stale device of trying to disarm criticism by prefacing his book with an unfavorable review of it, one naturally wonders why he is so impatient of the certainly superior poses of some of the authors whom he denounces for their insincerity. When he sharply criticizes the "jargon" of Van Wyck Brooks, one expects to hear him praise a critic who is free from such defects, but Professor Beach leaves one speechless by hailing Mr. Paul Rosenfeld as "a critic to be reckoned with," who "writes much better than Huneker," and "has a much sharper mind."

It is possible to like Mr. Rosenfeld's criticism, if one can stand its lush, exotic, sentimentalism, but nobody would care, I think, to acquit him of those very faults, at their worst, which Mr. Beach finds unbearable in others. If ever a style betrayed misuse of English, jargon, weak grammar, and incoherence, it is the style of Mr. Rosenfeld and of Waldo Frank. Yet, Professor Beach shoves aside John Dewey, Joseph Hergesheimer, Van Wyck Brooks, and Dreiser, for being guilty of those offences, only to press the claims of John Dos Passos, Paul Rosenfeld, Sherwood Anderson, and Waldo Frank. In a discussion of these writers on the question of style, and style alone, I think it is not unreasonable to suggest that in championing the one group as against the other, the author destroys his whole case. The four whom he so very mildly reproves for their minor defects may be authors of a great deal more significance in American literature—that is another question. But when we are told "the university man is necessarily an eclectic, and what he asks of writing is that it should be first-rate," and that university man proceeds to argue that Van Wyck Brooks uses jargon, whereas Paul Rosenfeld has a "sharp mind," well, . . .

Professor Beach thinks that Thomas Hardy and George Moore handled the English language in a manner which is beyond the attainments of Joseph Hergesheimer. Yet, the abomination of Moore's style, in places, has been repeatedly discussed. Not so long ago Moore, having once pilloried Newman for writing badly, attacked Thomas Hardy, and was in turn attacked by John Middleton Murry. In each case the device employed was to pick out some passage or passages that were carelessly written, and to ask triumphantly: Is that what you call good English? Mr. Beach does this to Dreiser, Brooks, Hergesheimer, and Van Vechten, while invoking Moore