

New England's Strength

A HISTORY OF CORNWALL, CONNECTICUT: A Typical New England Town. By EDWARD C. STARR. New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Co. 1926. \$10.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

I AM a citizen of Cornwall only by self-adoption, a walker of its wooded roads, a summer idler on its hill-top pastures, a dallier in old cemeteries and beneath lilac and pine. I can pretend to no scholarship in Cornwalliana and do not know whether the Reverend Gold, with whom (and England) the town made peace in 1783, was the noble Christian his tombstone still proclaims him, or "unguarded in the direction of obscenity" as a contemporary avers, and therefore quite unworthy of the salary he fought for so pertinaciously while the Revolution was being managed, with scarcely greater disturbance to Cornwall, elsewhere. But I know a meaty volume when I see it. To me, until I read this book (and an earlier history by the Reverend Gold's grandson) Cornwall was just so many pleasant valleys, white-housed and many-streamed, with still pleasanter hilltops looking northward to the Taconics, sweet with fern and bright with cinquefoil or daisy. But what a town is revealed in these pages! What a country Connecticut once was! What congestion of life and thinking on its thin soil, what a knobbed existence, cracking and breaking into sparks, what power and prepotence in its people!

The Reverend Starr is wise. He sees that a little community may be a roadway down time as worth the following as the broader avenues of history. The course is narrow and crooked but the perspective is close and the visibility high. His history begins with Annals in which, year by year, the fall of Napoleon, the Reverend Gold's recovery of his impounded ram, the discovery of Uranus, the Atridean tragedies of Dudleytown (above Dark Entry near Hardscrabble), the Crimean war, and the arrival of the first train on the two strips of iron stretched past West Cornwall, take their place in one broad measure, where the little event proclaims its indubitable life beside the great happening. Cornwall moves and the world moves beside it.

And it appears that except for war and revolution (our Bloody Mountain is named for a fight that never came off) pretty much all that has happened in the great world outside has happened at least once, and with emphasis, in this little town. Microcosm repeats the macrocosm. Great men and great movements were born here, husbands and wives went through every pace of the marital drama (see the section of biographies)—courage, honesty, comedy, tragedy, there is an example for every category. Abookiah, the Hawaiian savage, was found weeping on the steps of Yale College because he saw no hope of an education, and was educated in Cornwall. Two Cherokees, sons of chiefs, ran off with the belles of Cornwall and brought to an end the first missionary school in America, whence light was being spread over the South Seas and Asia (there were other reasons for the closing, notably the winter climate, but miscegenation was the climax). How both men were murdered, and the ballad written of their adventures also belong to the story. There are other spicy items. Captain Gold, who hated "paper work" but was a good officer to his men in the Civil War, came back to Cornwall a broken man, built stone walls and planted those lines of elms the town takes pride in, and died a tramp in a sawmill. Photius Fiske, born on the island of Hydra, and a resident of Cornwall, was a friend of John Brown, got Congress to abolish flogging for seamen, was chaplain in the Navy, turned infidel and scandalously kept his pension, left his fortune to the poor, but the lawyers got it all. Matthew Lyon, the bound boy from Ireland, who was sold for a pair of stags (i. e., bulls), fought with Ethan Allan, went to Congress, broke the tie between Jefferson and Burr and elected the first Democratic president. "By the bulls that bought me," was his favorite oath, like Bagheera. There is the curious humor of Captain Jeffers, captain of a company of "Hell-Hounds" in the Revolution, Indian fighter, who writes to Cornwall from the far-off West of the Alleghenies—

The curious sight of a man and woman both hanging on one gallows for the horrid crime of fornication, and the striking poetry made on the occasion is very entertaining. Add the story of the Reverend Beriah Hotchkiss who prayed that he might not outlive his usefulness,

and who after serving five towns was dismissed at the age of seventy-two. "His wife was named Thankful—!"

These are snippets merely. Steam heat (most appropriately) was invented in Cornwall, the scientific teaching of agriculture began there, missionaries, spread over the East, called Cornwall home, and some of the meanest rascals in print stayed in Cornwall and are recorded in this book. It was a great race, crabbed yet powerful.

"The History of Cornwall" was not written to supply material for fiction, though it may be highly recommended as a rich source for novelists, dramatists, and short-story writers, yet it is clear from his sub-title that the Reverend Starr was well aware that in his assemblage of human documents from two centuries he was presenting New England by typical example. I have not been just to his method, for in orderly fashion, by categories, he presents in five hundred pages the roads, rivers, trade, education, religion, and biography of this town which, though reasonably happy and quite without fame, has had so much history. Yet I suspect that town histories should be written like his, with an emphasis on the human, and a bold disregard of the "flow" and "evolution" which supposedly take place in nations, yet are so suspiciously absent in towns. The author says in his Preface, "I have tried to be accurate, but do not guarantee my facts, as they are not of my manufacture," a statement which historians of more important periods might copy; and he continues: "Every reader will wonder why some things are here written and others omitted. He is welcome to guess," the candor of which I commend to the scientific chroniclers of this age of research who do not always know why they include, or that they have omitted.

Herodotus wrote in this fashion, and I am not sure that the town of Cornwall, typical of New England, typical of human nature, when peculiar circumstances of breeding, environment, and education force out its infinite variety, is not as worthy of consideration as some of his little towns of long ago. Cornwall will leave only stone walls for ruins, though the North Church just restored is perfect of its impermanent kind, but its hills will remain, and its prepotent blood has already gone out over America and the far seas.

Deadlock

LITTLE PITCHERS. By ISA GLENN. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT B. MACDOUGALL

MISS GLENN'S characters grope in a semi-darkness of misunderstanding and shallow selfishness; they struggle towards happiness, but there is no road obvious enough for their limited intelligences to follow. In her first novel, "Heat," Miss Glenn dealt with stagnation and disintegration in the Philippines. Her second, "Little Pitchers," changes the scene but not the mood, revealing, against a background of China and Brazil, the futility of attempted reconciliation between a stupid though well-intentioned husband and a wife who had been born with the instincts of a high-grade prostitute. The life of these two, as they travel from country to country at the bidding of opportunity (the husband, a civil engineer, has some vague connection with the building of railroads), is one long discontent, one ceaseless quarrel. They have no settled home, no plan of life, no community of interest—all is domestic chaos. As a recorder of this incompatibility, their son, the little pitcher of the title, is brought into the narrative by Miss Glenn. Truly he does have the big ears of the proverb, a comprehension that, as he grows older, destroys his happiness by its acuteness; and through his constantly widening perceptions the life of father and mother is given to the reader. Such is Miss Glenn's daring scheme for a novel, a scheme that she carries through with brilliant success. But "Little Pitchers" is not for the lover of sunshine and weak tea in literature. It is for those who cherish honesty, and insight, and skill.

Michael, the little boy whose ears and eyes are precociously retentive, is a character of infinite pathos. We see him as the prototype of all children in like circumstances, unnecessary, unwanted, forever misunderstanding and misunderstood. As we watch him at the age of four and follow him through the next ten years we feel small wonder that he is slightly inhuman, that he worries about cobweb problems, and has no interest in the normal

pursuits of boyhood. But in this strangeness of Michael it seems as if Miss Glenn has made her only serious error: we do not sympathize with or understand his desire to get some message, *the word* he calls it, at first from the moon, then from God, then from himself, some *word* that shall solve the mysteries he sees around him. There is much tiresome talk about this *word*. His character is strong enough to do without it, for, although not the most important in "Little Pitchers," it is responsible for the novel's unusual effectiveness.

In addition to the father, mother, and son the book has much to offer. There are, for example, the three girls who live near Michael's home in Rio, three girls who surely would be fit companions for the young savages in "The Constant Nymph." And again, in these three, we have the *motif* of the little pitchers. But character is not all, for we are blessed with an abundance of shrewd and effective writing when Miss Glenn sketches in the backgrounds for the plot. Rio de Janeiro is as real to us as the room in which we read, and Lages, a camp set high among the inland mountains of Brazil, gives a vivid, exotic setting for a deftly insinuating passage that will repel some readers and delight others.

Throughout, Miss Glenn is skilful; she builds drama subtly and with a sure power. This novel, furthermore, is a proof of her originality. To be sure, it is easy to find minor faults, but we are safe in saying that no fundamental weakness exists to drag down her future achievement. "Little Pitchers" should be read by all who appreciate excellence in the novel. But let the devotees of the polite and the conventional beware; they will be just a little shocked.

Another Test Case

THE KAYS. By MARGARET DELAND. New York: Harper & Bros. 1926. \$2.

Reviewed by LEE WILSON DODD

IN reviewing "Iowa Interiors" by Ruth Suckow, some weeks ago, I entered a caveat against a method of writing fiction which I was pleased to call "unemphatic naturalism." My objection to it, in a word, was that the more perfectly it was done the more certainly it would end by putting you to sleep. Now few things are better than sleep, as Sancho Panza noted, but it is not precisely the function of the arts to induce it.

Mrs. Deland's new novel is an excellent example of an utterly different tendency—a way of story telling that seems to me even more vicious. "The Kays," frankly, is a pacifist tract disguised as fiction. It is moral and social propaganda. It is a sugar-coated pill.

Well—why not? Why shouldn't a woman who has many seductive and popular qualities as a writer employ her talents to forward whatever cause she wholeheartedly believes in? What else has Bernard Shaw been up to for all of forty years? If we encourage him to write tracts in the guise of farces and comedies, heaping praise and money upon him, what right have we to lecture Mrs. Deland when she produces a tract in the guise of a novel?

The one reply is, that it is the function of criticism to be discerning and intelligent in respect to the arts. Unhappily, criticism has to be carried on by critics, who—in spite of rumors to the contrary—are human, and therefore subject to flaws of insight and lapses from pure reason. The field of aesthetics, moreover, is one of the trickiest of terrains. The scenery is exquisite, it is surrounded by delectable mountains, but the ground under foot is very uncertain, filled with pitfalls and shifting sands. Skulls and thighbones of the strayed and lost are lying about and add little to one's sense of security. Nevertheless, earlier adventurers have found paths through this lovely wilderness, which a quick eye and cautious foot may retrace with comparative safety. And one of these paths leads close to, yet cleanly away from the Didactic Swamp. All round the borders of this swamp footsteps may be discerned pointing inward, but few indeed point outward! Many critics have noted this fact, and most of them are convinced it is rather significant.

The trouble seems to be that when you write a novel to teach mankind a specific lesson you are no longer a free creative agent. You inhibit the depths and go to work only with the thin conscious top-layer of your personality. You foresee everything in advance, you grow crafty, you plan and contrive. You devise a situation which will illustrate and enforce, as you fondly believe, your moral. Then

you take certain sticks of wood and whittle out the necessary puppets to fit into your situation, and you begin pushing them about into prearranged combinations. And the strange, jealous, and invisible gods and demons of Life and Art grow offended because you have not trusted them. They refuse to aid you. No sparks descend from above or surge upward from below. Nothing kindles—no matter how you rub your conscious wits and purposes together. What began as a contraption ends as a contraption, and the harder you try the less you accomplish.

It is so with this present novel. All Mrs. Deland's spiritual fervor and sincerity go for nothing, because they have been misapplied. She has not moved us either to a more passionate or a more tranquil and philosophic awareness of life; she has merely irritated us by a piece of special pleading. Here is the story—

Agnes Kay, a New England girl, is living in Mrs. Deland's favorite Old Chester, the wife of a certain Major Kay, an affluent ex-soldier of the Mexican and Seminole wars who is engaged in running a lottery. The action takes place before, during, and after the Civil War. Agnes is an uncompromising idealist, a born reformer far in advance of her times. She has one son, Arthur, whom—as our behaviorists would say—she is *conditioning* to be exactly like herself. Her husband, usually called Beau Kay, is not really a bad fellow—just the average sensual and rather stupid man of his period, plus an occasional flash of mysticism which Mrs. Deland has carefully planted in him for a special purpose of her own. Hence these occasional flashes—as when the gallant Major addresses a trellis covered with morning glories as “the Holy Ghost”—are not particularly convincing.

Agnes, when the story begins, is living in the house with her husband, but has broken off marital relations with him. She announced to him on the day Arthur was born that she would never bear him another child. A letter had arrived that very day disclosing some dereliction. Then, one day, while Arthur was still a baby, a crazy woman was brought to the house. The Major was away on a business trip. Agnes took the crazy woman into her home, placed her in an attic chamber and cared for her with her own hands, untiringly, until the woman's death many years later, letting no one but herself ever enter the room. On the Major's return, she explained merely that this crazy woman was a friend of hers. The Major, rather surprisingly, but very conveniently for the story, seems to have accepted this explanation.

Beau Kay is an Episcopalian, as he feels a gentleman should be. Agnes, however, has joined a strict religious sect, the True Followers, who are non-resistants. She brings Arthur up to be a True Follower. He signs their Pledge for Peace, as a young boy, and because he lives up to it by frequently turning the other cheek he soon gets the reputation of being a sissy and a coward. Beau Kay, who otherwise pays little attention to the boy, is incensed that his cranky wife should have turned *his* son—the son of a soldier!—into a mollycoddle.

Next door to the Kays there is a lovely, bouncing widow with two rough-and-tumble boys and a beautiful little girl, Lois, the bigness of whose heart is supposed to compensate for the smallness of her intellect. Judged by her words and actions she seems little above the status of high-grade moron, and to do intelligence justice, Arthur's mother seems the one person to recognize this fact. Certainly Arthur does not! As he comes to young manhood, he loves Lois and Lois dotes on him. Her brothers say Arthur is a coward, and Lois believes he is a coward—but as she feels he can't help it she only loves him the more. Then, the proper date and posture of events having arrived, Fort Sumter is fired on.

When Beau Kay himself finances, commands, and drills a company of volunteers, his own son will not join. He will not fight for his country. He tells his father that war is “hellish idocy.” He is right. But no one in Old Chester agrees with him, except his mother and the small band of True Followers. Even Lois doesn't agree with him, but she feels so sorry for him that she engages herself to him all the same. Then her mother, whose two brave sons are at the front, indignantly carries Lois off with her to Washington and forbids her even to correspond with Arthur. Lois dutifully obeys and suffers. The years pass. Her brothers are both killed. The war at last is over. Lois returns to

Old Chester, and so too does Arthur. During the last years of the war he has so far compromised with conscience as to do civilian work for his government. But he returns a slandered man, accused of cheating his country's soldiers. He will not deny the accusation, not even to Lois. He is too brave, too upright, too hurt and proud. So Lois thinks he is not only a coward but a thief—and therefore she runs away with him and marries him. She is so terribly sorry for him that all that doesn't matter. He is an outcast, so he needs her love more than ever.

Of course, Arthur does not realize that Lois believes him to be a coward and a thief; he thinks she understands everything. This is perhaps a supreme example of the blindness of love.

Well, at last it all comes out. Beau Kay gives Arthur the necessary hint; Arthur interrogates Lois; Lois admits that she married him because she thought him a dishonest weakling in great need of her affection. Arthur goes out blindly into the night. It is snowing hard. And just then the crazy woman upstairs (had you forgotten her?) dies in the arms of devoted Agnes. The strain is too much for Agnes at last, and for the first time in her life she calls for help. Beau Kay dashes up the stairs and into the attic room. One look at the dead face, and he sees it all. “Good God!” he exclaims. For once, many years ago, that poor crazy woman, now at rest, had been a lively young trollop—and his mistress! He says as much to the doctor:

“A trollop, she was, Willy, when I first knew her, poor thing! I don't want you to think worse of me than you have to. But my wife—The Holy Ghost, William, the Holy Ghost!”

So it was that Beau Kay came at last to appreciate the silent bravery and devotion of his wife. And when Arthur had thought things over, out there in the snow, he returned to Lois. It is a tearful and a happy ending.

If in retelling this plot I have been rude enough to make fun of it, I can only plead in extenuation that it satirizes itself; and in the long run I venture to think that Mrs. Deland will agree with me, since she is a woman of character and brains, and has often proved herself a charming, persuasive, and artistic writer. I have sufficiently indicated above what I believe to be the cause of her present misfortune. It will still be a misfortune even if, as is only too possible, the book should prove to be a popular success.

Novel Devils

BEFORE THE BOMBARDMENT. By OSBERT SITWELL. New York: George H. Doran. 1926. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LEONARD BACON

MR. SITWELL'S novel is much too fine a performance to win at once the admiration it deserves. One critic has already predicted permanence for it, and if there were any particular use in being oracular, I could do a little prophesying myself. But a work of such combined solidity and lightness can do what is necessary on its own account. It is full of power, and it will make its way irrespective of critical vaporings, for it is the kind of book which finds an audience not summoned by trumpets.

I do not know Mr. Sitwell's other works. And it is fair to state that when I began “Before the Bombardment” I was in the frame of mind of the man who said he never did like Thackeray till he read one of his books. I was not prepared to be pleased, and in fact was hunting for certain things toward which I was working up a studious hostility. Instead of those things I found perhaps the most curious study of maiden ladies in existence, and a work of extraordinary intellectual elaboration written in a brilliant yet unassuming and naturally poetic style.

“Before the Bombardment” is the history of the life and opinions of Miss Teresa Bramwell—a paid companion, how she was formed by Miss Fansharp her first employer, and how she found love and grief and defeat with Miss Collier-Floodgaye (the *e* is important) in the far away Edwardian times when German cruisers never shot up provincial hotels. And in short the book is the post-war looking at the pre-war with irony, sympathy, detachment, and discernment.

It would seem that the love affair of two old maids might be slender diet—hardly Lesbian enough for modern tastes. So it would be, if it were not for brilliant understanding of states of mind, for

the glorious writing, and for the way in which a meagre episode is loaded with symbolic implication until it is able to express the tragedy, defeat, and imbecility of an entire generation.

Mr. Sitwell has penetrated very strange places in this book. He has yoked reason and intuition to his chariot, and they have drawn him safe over ground which if not enchanted is infested by brand-new jinns and novel devils, authentic if not spectacular. There is bitter poignancy in the situation. Miss Collier-Floodgaye hires Miss Bramwell, because, in her need to escape from herself, she must have an ambassadress to smooth the path to natural human contacts. But what Miss Bramwell needs is the precise opposite, not liberty but servitude, to be the single, the engrossing element in the life of the served. And her jealousy of the old lady is in direct proportion to the latter's burning need of social contact. One wishes to go out, and the other to take in. It is just as tragic as any other spiritual clash, with the added horror that it is agreed by the world that old maids are uninteresting into the bargain.

But they aren't uninteresting seen through Mr. Sitwell's lens. They become part of nature, live things, moving against the whalebacked seas, or the scooped and tumbled moors behind Newborough. On the esplanade they are watched by a thousand scandal-mongers. Their names are tossed across every tea-table by avid connoisseurs. The mystery of Miss Collier-Floodgaye's past, the mystery of her present, of her future are the subjects of pitiless speculation in a town inhabited by the infirm, the superannuated, and the ineffective. And it all ends when Miss Collier-Floodgaye's fortune goes to the next of kin instead of to Miss Bramwell for whom it was intended, because Miss Bramwell was guilty of an omission, of which the iron code of companions and her own inclination compelled her to be guilty.

* * *

Strange as it may seem to say so, the book is like tremendous music wrought on some gross or common theme. Glück is said to have snatched one of his finest motives from the dull roar of a starving Viennese crowd. Mr. Sitwell has developed a composition from the scarcely audible sigh of a woman trained by dieting to suppress every natural impulse. But for all that his book is full of organic and profound harmonies, and his counterpoint is flawless. When he seems to be wandering from his theme, he is only becoming more relevant. And the book has a wholeness and a completeness that only the most thoughtful artists achieve.

Paradoxically this is perhaps its weakest quality. That wholeness and completeness is perhaps too obvious. Something of the odious thoroughness of a mathematical proof inheres in the book, as if Mr. Sitwell fancied (what I do not believe he fancies at all) that thought and intuition would carry him through. The mind does other things beside rendering a reason and choosing a possibility. To the reviewer it seems that a certain coolness of detachment has in some degree frosted the glass through which Mr. Sitwell shows us an elaborate picture of Hell, simply conceived by Fra Angelico and complexly executed by the strange collaboration of Goya and Cézanne.

In a recent address before the British Society of Authors, Mr. W. B. Maxwell made some amusing references to the fees earned for their masterpieces by great writers of the past. The first was to the case of John Milton:

“He sold ‘Paradise Lost’ for £5,” he said. “But on reflection, I thought afterwards that I should have done better if I had instanced the case of Oliver Goldsmith and the ‘Vicar of Wakefield.’”

“Goldsmith entrusted the manuscript of the novel to Johnson as to one ‘in the know,’ asking him, no doubt, to do the best he could. Johnson bustled out with the copy in his hands and sold the thing outright to a bookseller for £60. Think of it! No attempt to reserve the copyright, to secure possession of subsidiary rights, dramatization, translation, serialization. Films and broadcasting, of course, did not exist. He defended his conduct of affairs afterwards by saying that, ‘Why, sir, it was a sufficient price when it was sold, for then the fame of Goldsmith had not been elevated. . . . Later on, to be sure, it was accidentally worth more money.’ Imbecile!”