

## A Family Group

THE ALLINGHAMS. By MAY SINCLAIR. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AMY WELLINGTON

LONG ago, May Sinclair threw on the scrap-heap Victorian plots and Victorian heroines, letting her characters mould her novels and presenting women who are our contemporaries. More and more, she has become the detached and scrupulous artist; and whether it is an individual or a group (as in the present novel) which occupies her, the work is done in three dimensions, not two. Miss Sinclair says to us in effect: For flat surfaces, I do not care. Here are people, not as they appear, but as they really exist, insofar as I am able to perceive and transmit them. The result is a long succession of characters and events which have never before appeared in English fiction, presented with the art of a master, clear, compact, and solid, and from the tranquil depths of a philosophy which seeks not to startle but to reveal.

In "The Allinghams," it is not an individual but a group that has claimed May Sinclair's attention, a family group; and although the Allingham family is not so remarkable as the Harrisons, for instance, in "The Tree of Heaven," this apparently does not concern the artist. She has studied her rather ordinary middle-class English people with the same intentness, and equally they live through the medium of her art. May Sinclair is not so much concerned with the type as with the individual, yet this family of Allinghams is typical; for within its fold and underneath its surface conventionality, life expresses itself in wild and various ways.

Father and Mother are perfect Victorian survivals. Aunt Martha (the maiden aunt who lives in the family) cannot always be counted upon to uphold the Virtues, particularly where the children's happiness is at stake. The three sons and three daughters are brought up on their father's Berkshire estate, in a beautiful old Georgian house, strictly according to health and the conventions. Yet one son, Robin, drinks; and a daughter, Margaret, goes mad. The youngest child, Angela, gives herself recklessly to handsome Captain Cartaret on the eve of his departure for India with an unloved, unloving, and undivorceable wife. Thoughtful Stephen consecrates his life to the writing of unintelligible poetry. Only two of the Allingham children are content to live in comfortable propriety. And slowly, painfully, Father and Mother are brought to compromise with the younger generation. When Robin marries, "beneath him," a farmer's daughter who falters a little in her grammar but not in her determination to help him to sobriety, they are not shipped off to Canada as Father had planned, while Angela's illegitimate and charming Baby is finally accepted as a member of the family. That is a very beautiful scene, in the concluding chapter, where Father and Mother go up to the children's night nursery (long since deserted and lonely) to look at Baby confidently asleep in the cot, after months of angry exclusion, and we witness the gentle reconciliation of Victorian morals with life's unaccountable needs and urgencies.

"Books," says Storm Jameson, "are a good deal more to us than ways of escape. It would be a pity if they were not. They are the houses of our friends, our very faithful friends, who are never weary of our company, never fail to welcome us, and never betray us. Lucky the man who has one such friend among his fellows. In his books he may have a score. He may have them of any age and either sex. He may pick and choose among all arts and all trades. He may hobnob with the wise Ulysses or watch Penelope at her nightly task of unravelling the web of her daytime promises, and perhaps find out by what arts she kept herself attractive and desirable to her suitors during all the years of her husband's absence, and was found by him still young, still enchanting, when he returned. He may cheat Shylock of his dues and discover the quality of Christian mercy. . . . Let no man call himself lonely or unfriended, when he has books about him."

## The BOWLING GREEN

### A Note on George Gissing

IF one wanted something to brood about, he might ask himself just why it is that George Gissing's books cast such a peculiar spell over their devotees. Upon me, at any rate, that spell is just as efficacious in his less successful works as it is in the radiant and universally admitted charm of *Ryecroft*. The recent—somewhat tentative—revival of interest in Gissing (really begun, as most revivals were, by the late Mr. Mosher, seven years ago) afflicted hardened Gissingers with a queer dilation of amazement. For the Gissing toxin is of that specially subtle kind that each inoculate wonders in his private skull what anyone else could find relishable in books so mournful, prosy, and ironic. If anything on earth is unfashionable just now it is the particular kind of technique that Gissing employed in fiction. Yet, if I have to testify, I must admit that at no time in the last ten years have I ever visited a second-hand bookshop without keeping an eye open for his books.

And when, the other day, I found *The Odd Women* (first edition, three volumes, 1893) at Alfred Goldsmith's on Lexington Avenue, I was particularly pleased. This was one of Gissing's I had never read, and I had always heard of it as one of his most depressing. It is a humiliating confession, I suppose: beginning the book in a low mood I found myself progressively more cheerful. There is something so complete in the griefs which Gissing unloads upon the six sisters of his tale that I admit I ended in excellent spirits.

This sounds so heartless that I must justify myself by some synopsis of the story. It begins by Dr. Madden remarking to his eldest daughter that "Tomorrow I shall take steps to insure my life for a thousand pounds." Dr. Madden, a country physician in his fiftieth year, has everything to live for. But the experienced student of fiction knows, from that very first sentence, that nothing can save him. He is doomed. He should have taken out that insurance long ago. The happy little carefree tea-party in the opening chapter, when the doctor reads *The Lotos Eaters* aloud to his girls, cannot fool us for a moment. Sure enough, that very evening he is thrown out of his dog-cart, and by page 16 he is dead. The mother of the six girls had already been "resting in the old churchyard" for two years. So now we follow the fortunes of the daughters.

Between pages 16 and 17, fifteen years pass by, so that already, in the second chapter, the Madden girls know that they're in for it. Alice, the oldest has a job as a governess at £16 a year. She has "brown hair, but very little of it." Worse still (she is now thirty-five) she "tended to corpulence; she had round shoulders and very short legs." Her complexion was "spoilt," her cheeks were loose and puffy, her forehead generally had a few pimples. She walked with a quick ungainly movement as if seeking to escape from someone.

Virginia (33) is a "lady's companion" at £12 a year. She also looks unhealthy, her lips are "lax," and wrinkles are "extending their network." She had undermined her constitution by excessive study of ecclesiastical history. Her out-of-doors dress was now in its third summer, poor soul. But her creator does have the heart to relent a little: "She could not have been judged anything but a lady. She wore her garments as only a lady can (the position and movement of the arms has much to do with this), and had the step never to be acquired by a person of vulgar instincts." But alas, even while she is on her way to buy a copy of Keble's *Christian Year*, as a birthday present for the youngest sister, we learn the worst. She goes into the refreshment bar of Charing Cross Station and has a furtive slug of brandy. You will not be surprised to hear that in volume three poor Virginia goes to a Home for Inebriates.

The three next in line are Gertrude, Martha, and Isabel. They are soon disposed of. Even in the preliminary chapter, when they were aged 14, 12,

and 10, they had "no charm but youthfulness." By page 29 Gertrude and Martha are both beyond the troubles of Victorian fiction: "the former of consumption, the other drowned by the over-turning of a pleasure boat." Isabel, the plainest of the lot, does not survive them long (only two pages). She taught in a Board School. "Isabel was soon worked into illness. Brain trouble came on, resulting in melancholia. A charitable institution ultimately received her, and there, at two-and-twenty, the poor hard-featured girl drowned herself in a bath."

The following sentence, I am ashamed to say, moved me to audible mirth. "Their numbers had thus been reduced by half."

I wonder if any really competent novelist ever wrote anything more perversely grotesque than those first thirty pages of *The Odd Women*? It so rouses the wanton nerves of merriment that it almost unfits you to pursue with requisite seriousness the really fine stuff that follows. For there is fine stuff. Monica, the pretty youngest sister, escapes from drudgery in a draper's shop only to marry the hopelessly inappropriate Widdowson, a gloomy and jealous misanthrope old enough to be her father. Monica has been just enough touched by the "emancipation of women" movement to struggle feebly for her right to exist as an individual, but is not strong enough to make a go of it. She falls in love with a humorous young wine-merchant, and the episode of her sorry little infatuation is gently managed; yet Gissing tends to be impatient with all women not of intellectual tastes and sometimes seems almost irritated with poor Monica for lending herself to the very coincidences he has contrived for her misery. In the end Monica dies in child-birth; Virginia, as we have said, goes to an Institution; one can suspect that the only reason why even one of the sisters was spared was because someone had to look after the baby—also, ironically, a girl, another Odd Woman for the future.

The real weight and heft of Gissing's novel lies in the love story of Rhoda Nunn and Barfoot. In the character of Rhoda, the young radical so suspicious of men and of marriage and who had within her, unguessed by herself, such rich potential of passionate surrender, Gissing found a theme congenial to his idealism. Rhoda is certainly the finest feminine portrait that I have found in Gissing's gallery; she would rank high in any collection of notable women. Her courage and self-command are set over against the weakling and pitiable lives of the Madden sisters; but her love for the cynic Barfoot is frustrated too. Gissing's irony is at any rate consistent. And, once we can push beyond the deplorably comic effect of his opening passages, we begin to perceive his strong pity. Nowadays, when—superficially at least—the footing of woman seems so much more secure, some of the speculations of his emancipated ladies seem truism; but there are those who are highly praised for courage when they say the same things today. With all his distrust of women, his clear eye saw the appalling difficulty of their situation. Rhoda utters a remarkable saying in the course of this story—

If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea, we should have some chance of reforming women. The girl's nature was corrupted with sentimentality, like that of every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not intelligent enough to understand its vice.

You will suspect, before you finish the three volumes, that Gissing thought highly of Rhoda. He paid her the highest compliment in his repertoire—"She had not a beautiful face; yet even at the first meeting it did not repel him. Studying her features he saw how fine was their expression . . . the prominent forehead, with its little unevennesses that meant brains."

The phrase is equally true of Gissing's novels. They are full of unevennesses, but there are always brains. His passion for human happiness and decency was so strong that by some queer inward twist it drove him to bedevil his characters for the sake of his high-minded theories. By an equally queer twist in at least one of his readers, that habit of his makes him the ideal novelist for moments of depression.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.



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## Books of Special Interest

## Hellenism and the War

THE LOVE OF MYRRHINE AND KONALLIS, AND OTHER POEMS IN PROSE. By RICHARD ALDINGTON. Chicago: Pascal Covici. 1926. \$7.50.

Reviewed by EDWARD DAVISON

MR. ALDINGTON'S unmistakable gifts make it difficult to understand why he has never come to terms with the art of poetry. A few years ago he was producing "free-verse" which, with a minimum of typographical rearrangement, could be made to reveal the nakedest of iambic pentameters.

*The ancient songs pass deathward mournfully,  
Cold lips that sing no more and withered wreaths,  
Regretful eyes and drooping breasts and wings,  
Symbols of ancient songs, mournfully passing.* . . .

Now he describes the fragments in his new volume as "prose poems" and one would be hard put to it to explain wherein they differ (save in typography) from free-verse. It is all very confusing unless one has learned to foster a disregard for the names of things while still maintaining an interest in their inherent nature.

"The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis" might have been sired by the Greek Anthology (Mackail's translation) out of Sappho, and weaned, as it were, by H.D. This is not to suggest that Mr. Aldington has been influenced by the English version rather than the Greek. His scholarship, like his rather humorless sincerity, cannot be doubted. But he has not outstripped the mere translator whose prose versions avowedly lack the grace and finish of their metrical originals. Not for the first time Mr. Aldington has produced a rather meagre book which can only be praised faintly for its negative qualities. Incidentally, we venture to suggest, it is also a book that is likely to find the majority of its limited public among the collectors of naughty literature. The author will be amply revenged for their mistake as to his intentions when such people discover how mild a taste of naughtiness they have bought for seven-and-a-half dollars. Let Mr. Aldington's erotica speak for itself.

I, Konallis, am but a goat girl dwelling on the violet hills of Korinthos. But going down to the city a marvelous thing befel me; for the beautiful fingered hetaira, Myrrhine, held me nightlong in her couch, teaching me to receive her strange burning caresses.

\* \*

He gives us a score of poems on the same theme. The present reviewer is unsympathetic enough to recall somebody's phrase about ordure in aspic. But even when familiarity has withered these Sapphic blooms the investor will be able to console himself with the flattering type, the paper, and binding of the volume.

Mr. Aldington very quickly leaves the sea to sob round the Lesbian promontories by itself, and then he has some revealing things to say concerning the psychological effects of his war experiences. In one of these later fragments he refers with characteristic solemnity to his own position:

To have passed so close to annihilation and (which is worse) to have become stained unalterably with the ideas and habits of the masses—this leaves me immeasurably discouraged, out of love with myself. Now I am good only to mimic the inferior masters . . . for me silence, or if speech, then some humble poem in prose. Indeed I am too conscientious—or shall we say impotent—to dare the cool rhythm of prose, the sharp edges of poetry. Nymph de Parnasse! Encore un Pegase rate!

Here is self-deceit as well as self-compassion, both a kind of sentimentality. So far as Mr. Aldington truthfully reflects his mind in his work, he is much less "stained" (a suspiciously superior word) than most poets by the ideas and habits of the masses. Whence comes, for instance, his preoccupation for Lesbianism? From Bloomsbury, or Hampstead, or Golders Green? It might be better with Mr. Aldington's verse if he displayed his likelier stains more frequently. When he did so, in his last long poem, "A Fool in the Forest," and when he does so again in a few pieces in the present volume, the verse (or, if you will, the prose) suddenly leaps into life. He gains more than he knows whenever he allows himself to be touched by the very habits and ideas that are here so pettishly lamented. Nothing in his pseudo—and neo-Hellenic

imitations can compare with such a poem as "The Last Salute." As for mimicking inferior masters Mr. Aldington still mimics the same masters who occupied his interests before the war. And we suspect him of cant when he says that the "stain" he has suffered is worse than annihilation. In short, he strikes a false attitude which is hard to forgive in one whose intelligence deserves praise in so many other respects. The illustrations at the beginning and end of this book may lead the ignorant to suppose that Aubrey Beardsley still lives.

## Literary Attitudes

ROMANTICISM. By LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE. New York: The Viking Press. 1927. \$2.

Reviewed by FREDERICK E. PIERCE  
Yale University

THERE are two related factors in every poem, like soul and body. One is the author's thought or mental attitude; the other is the literary machinery through which he expresses this. Changes in the latter do not necessarily run parallel to those in the former. Mental attitudes in a succession of great poets may change but little, while their machinery of expression goes through the wildest alterations, partly for the sake of sheer variety, partly because the ever-shifting multitude will neither buy nor applaud unless the great stable minds seem to shift in harmony with them. So a great deal that is discussed in the way of literary movements, from neo-classicism to romanticism, from romanticism to naturalism, etc., represents really the fashionable changes in the Muses' wardrobes, rather than changes in those interesting ladies themselves.

But there are real differences as well in the depths of great minds; and it is with these, not with the shifting phantasmagoria of public taste, that Mr. Abercrombie deals. His little book is both intelligent and readable. He finds all literary thought splitting into two general divisions, the romantic and the realistic. The romantic emphasizes the inner life of the soul; the realistic emphasizes the external world and the soul's reaction to that. Practically every poet has some romanticism and some realism; but in most one predominates over the other and makes the author's work in general romantic or realistic, however this general effect may seem to be contradicted by occasional passages. Where both elements mingle in ideal balance the poet is neither romantic nor realistic, but classic, for classicism is not an element in literature, but a harmonious fusion of all elements. The author tacitly admits that under this division some of the greatest so-called "romantic" poets would become "classic;" and we are left to assume that under it some brilliant neo-classicists such as Pope, would become realists.

There is a great deal of truth in this attitude, truth that no reviewer's ink can wash away. But the author has not wholly escaped the fate of all critics who write on this vexed and confusing problem. Life is so vast and complicated that even the most skilful definitions will not wholly fit. He assumes that poets write in an esthetic vacuum, and forgets that they write in a stormy environment, which changes them in spite of their teeth. Does it follow because two writers become absorbed in their inner life, that they are naturally alike? In a great, inspiring age most great souls become eager to get in touch with the nobility around them, and we have humanistic poets who are men of affairs, as in the age of Æschylus. In an evil age souls equally great and strong draw away from the evil around them and turn in on themselves, not because they are different, but because their age is different. Such was the case with the Church Fathers and Neo-Platonic thinkers in decadent Rome. Today in America is the romanticist who escapes from Gopher Prairie into fairyland so different from the realist who photographs Gopher Prairie to damn it? Both hate the same town and the same life; both have a vision of something far more beautiful, making the town blacker by contrast. At bottom, the difference is often not so much in the quantity or quality of their poetic feeling as in the quantity and quality of their pugnacity. One runs away from the enemy, the other hits said enemy between the eyes; but both are on the same side in the battle.

Mr. Abercrombie has written an excellent book, but we do not feel that the problem is wholly solved even yet.

## Critic vs. Critic

As Llewellyn Jones predicted, there has been considerable misunderstanding of Professor Rickert's purpose in this first complete exposition of her new methods for the criticism of literature. Indignant and irritated critics have cried out that Miss Rickert "effects a dislocation of the total aesthetic experience", that "any method of studying literature which leaves out composition as its final goal is not literary and artistic."

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