

existing censorship laws will for the majority of readers become convincingly apparent. As the work is one which everyone who has to do with books in any way will read, there is no point in elaborating this argument further here.

It is now for the friends of the censors to defend and justify their continued existence. Here is an opportunity for them to produce, if they can, an adequate something in answer to the lyric cry of the flesh that eternally mocks them:

"O censeurs, montrez-moi un objet aussi beau que mon bien-aimé."

(As the citation is from one of the great books of the world not yet allowed to circulate in its full strength in the United States, it shall be nameless. For the further protection of the young, the quotation is made in French, which will notably remain for sometime yet the *lingua franca* of the larger purity.)

Following the historical summary come important chapters, "Towards a Test of Obscenity," "The Critic as Expert," and "Pornography and the Child." Here one or two items of dissent must be registered. It seems to the writer that our authors dismiss the critic as expert too summarily. Produced on the witness stand he would, no doubt, as our authors assert, infallibly make an ass of himself; but as pre-publication advisor he is not without merit. Nine out of ten "delicate questions" of printability can be settled by a competent critic on grounds of taste rather than of morals or law. The painters have a useful phrase to express a color in a picture that is too strong for its position. They say it "thumps." Well, sex is a very strong color. Unless used with discretion, or unless the other colors are very strong too, as for example in "The Arabian Nights," it is likely to "thump." In unskilful or meretricious hands it is sure to do so. A good proportion of the books that have been suppressed, full-blown, on dubious moral and legal grounds might well have been nipped in the bud by the critic by the application of this test.

It is in the chapter on "Pornography and the Child" that the authors make their chief constructive suggestion. When it comes to brass tacks they are a little elusive, but if I interpret them correctly, they would repeal all existing censorship laws and substitute the following:

Sec. 1. Pornography is any matter or thing exhibiting or visually representing persons or animals performing the sexual act whether normal or abnormal.

Sec. 2. It shall be criminal for anyone other than a teacher in the course of his employment, or a doctor in the regular practice of his profession, or a parent (of the child in question) to exhibit, sell, rent, or offer for exhibition, sale, or rent, any such pornographic material to any person under the age of eighteen.

So far so good! But one may question whether in the present stage of human imperfection it is quite far enough, even if the existing laws could conceivably be repealed in their entirety. Perhaps as much as can be humanly expected now is some such type of bill as that which the distressed Boston Booksellers tried unsuccessfully to put through the Great and General Court of Massachusetts last winter. This established an orderly procedure, which might prove expensive to the idle complainant. It shifted the burden of defense from the bookseller to the publisher and author, and put the affair in the first instance within the jurisdiction of the judges of the Superior Court, a more than ordinarily well-educated and enlightened body of men. Could it have contained a clause providing that the alleged obscene passage must be considered in relation to the intent, construction, and effect of the work as a whole, it would have satisfied pretty nearly all of the victims and survivors of the Boston Book Massacre of 1927, and might have proved a model law for other states.

But in the advanced political philosophy of Mr. Ernst and Seagle, all inhibitory laws are bad. They believe that repeal is a necessary precedent to progress towards a wholesome and abundant life for all the people. This is a point of view that has always had a powerful charm for generous minds. Our authors present it with notable vigor and diversified illustration. It is good and helpful to have it so presented, but sad practical men will doubt: (a) whether a sweeping repeal of the existing laws is conceivably possible within the time of our own lives; and (b) whether we have reached the stage of natural purity where it is desirable.

Whether we abolish the law, and progress in con-

sequence; or progress, and abolish the law in consequence, or progress and abolish with equal steps, we arrive at the same end. Let us all work towards it.

I like to think that some day it will be plain to everyone that the normal human mind is like the open and unconfined sea,—the mother of life; that it can take into itself dead things, slimy things, foulness and pollution, yet under the wind and the sun,—wind of dispute and sun of knowledge if you will,—turn all to a salty purity; but if the sea is dyked and canalized, if the mind is beset with repressions and restrictions then, and only then, the pollution is held suspended and can contaminate.

When we reach that day of understanding, and when through the progress of education and social hygiene, of psychological and surgical science, all human minds are normal then, at last, all things will be pure. As now in Paris in traffic incidents they quite properly arrest not the taxi driver, but the errant pedestrian, so perhaps in that millennium not the shocking volume but the shocked reader will be haled into court.

## The Caliph of Fonthill

THE TRAVEL-DIARIES OF WILLIAM BECKFORD. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 2 vols. 1928. \$12.50.

VATHEK. By WILLIAM BECKFORD. New York: The John Day Company. 1928.

Reviewed by ARNOLD WHITRIDGE

AMONG the innumerable idle, inquisitive, splenetic, and sentimental travellers of the eighteenth century none is more pathetic and at the same time less lovable than William Beckford, the Caliph of Fonthill. He was the richest man in England, he was happily married, and he was brilliantly clever, but at the age of twenty-seven his career was blasted by an unsavory scandal, probably untrue, which drove him into exile for twelve years and alienated him from his friends. The literary result of this exile was an account of his travels in Spain and Portugal, and recollections of an excursion to the monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha. These diaries, together with an earlier book of travel called "Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents," which like all Beckford's works, except "Vathek," have long been out of print, have been resurrected by Mr. Guy Chapman and formally introduced to the world again in a most attractive edition. If clothes can make the book then certainly Beckford's resuscitated Diaries deserve a long life. If they do not penetrate beyond the first line of critics and scholars to the attention of the general reader it will be because Beckford never inspires the faintest shadow of affection. Mr. Chapman admits as much himself: "Search all his writings and you will scarcely find one passage in which there is a reality of sentiment, an admission from the heart." There are scores of travellers, Smollett and Fielding among them, who make no attempt at sentiment and yet are eminently readable, but to attempt and fail is the unpardonable sin.

The first impression we get of Beckford in these volumes is not a happy one. He has arrived at Ostend and he is disgusted with it. "'Tis so unclassic a place. Nothing but preposterous Flemish roofs disgust your eyes when you cast them upwards: swaggering Dutchmen and mongrel barbers are the first object they meet with below." There is a certain irascibility which is rather companionable, but Beckford is not content with being wittily querulous. Unfortunately he meant precisely what he said when he called his book "Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents." We follow him through Holland, Germany, and Italy without ever coming in contact with reality. He observes nothing except his own sensibility. As he walks along the beach at Ostend he writes in this vein:

There, at least, thought I to myself, I may range undisturbed, and talk with my old friends the breezes, and address my discourse to the waves, and be as romantic and whimsical as I please. . . . I had not one peaceful moment to observe the bright tints of the western horizon, or enjoy the series of antique ideas with which a calm sunset never fails to inspire me.

Such writing may be entertaining for a few pages, but ultimately, as the reviewer knows to his cost, it becomes extremely wearisome.

Instead of a long incoherent rhapsody on his emotion over the Grande Chartreuse, what would we not give for an account of his visit to the shrivelled old man with large piercing eyes, who described

himself as "a poor octogenarian, about to quit this world—Voltaire." Beckford met a number of celebrities during the Grand Tour, among them Gibbon, whose library he bought, and a Mlle. Neckar, the daughter of a Swiss financier, a very talented young lady who was afterwards to cause Napoleon such annoyance. We know them from his letters but they never appear in the diaries. It seems almost as if in this first record of his Travels he had decided to exclude any mention of people or events. Sir William Hamilton, famous as the husband of the famous Lady Hamilton, flits through his pages without making any impression. When a Carthusian monk in Venice asks him the latest news of Lord George Gordon and the American War he pleads his ignorance of the Italian language. On every possible occasion he prides himself upon his self-sufficiency, his contempt for human society, and his enjoyment of nature.

By the time he reaches Spain and Portugal his *Weltschmerz* had given way to genuine enjoyment of society. Suddenly the pageantry of life begins to amuse him. Far from being entirely immersed in his own emotions he becomes delightfully aware of his environment. His love of music takes him out into the fashionable world where he establishes something of a reputation for himself as a mad Englishman. On one occasion he dances a fandango with such gusto that the onlookers "wonder how it was possible for a son of the cold north to have learned their rapturous flings and stampings."

But his recollections of his visit to the two great Portuguese monasteries shows us Beckford at his very best. This little book, written when he was seventy-five, forty years after the excursion took place, contains infinitely more vitality than the dreams of the twenty-year-old boy. It was not that Time had mellowed him; on the contrary, it had made his style more racy and pungent, and it had opened his eyes to a great deal of the comedy and tragedy being enacted around him which he had previously ignored. His satiric portraits of the monks, their splendid zest for food, and his own pride in his excellent French cook, who was so unpatriotic as to prefer Spanish wine to his native Clos de Vougeot, could hardly be bettered by any gourmet in literature. At the monastery of Alcobaça a certain truffle cream proved so exquisite that "my Lord Abbot forestalled the usual grace at the termination of repasts most piously to give thanks for it."

The Portuguese monasteries impressed Beckford so much that when he finally returned home after his wanderings, in 1796, he proceeded to build the famous Abbey of Fonthill. The architect's instructions were, in the first place, to produce a building with the external appearance of a half-ruined monastery, but enriched by every architectural device, and embellished by every object of beauty that money could buy. Five hundred men were employed on the decorations night and day, and the building was sufficiently completed in 1800, in spite of the collapse of the great tower, to receive Nelson, Lady Hamilton, and her accommodating husband.

Beckford lived in this extraordinary abbey for twenty years, at the end of which time he decided that the expense was too great, even for his unlimited purse. He sold it incidentally for £330,000. Hazlitt visited the abbey during the sale and described it as a "desert of magnificence," "a glittering waste of laborious idleness." The description might almost pass for Beckford's own life. No one was more afflicted with the acquisitive instinct and no one was less capable of sharing his treasures with others. In a sense he was a magnificent creature, but as any one will admit who reads "Vathek" it was, even at its best, an arid magnificence. What he lacked in his life was human sympathy, and no one can read his Travel-Diaries without being conscious of it. "I lost all my friends," he once remarked, "and was almost fearful to acquire new lest I should lose them in turn."

Colonel T. E. Lawrence has written to Mr. Raymond Savage, the secretary of his trustees, denying that he is writing a new book on the East.

A document which shows that the first work of Caxton was printed in 1476, a year before the generally accepted date, has been discovered at the British Record Office.



## Channels and Sandbanks

THE STRANGE NECESSITY. By REBECCA WEST. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1928. \$3.50.

Reviewed by EDWARD GARNETT

IF the main function of criticism be to render just judgments, a lesser one is to stimulate the reader, to excite him to think, to agree or disagree. For her stimulating qualities when Miss Rebecca West mounts the public platform she bears off many prizes. Hers is a fighting personality, provocative, fearless, wielding with a determined hand the critical bludgeon. Though she has as good an opinion of herself as she is overbearing with others she has real gifts, sharp insight, conviction, and a knack of brilliant phrasing. In her new book, "The Strange Necessity," her personality has full play. As with a tidal river, there are deep channels, shoals, and sandbanks in plenty. In pages at a stretch the writing is admirable, at others it is involved and in places abominable. Her verdicts are incisive, at times brilliant, but often too smart or a little cheap. She has, with the younger school, assimilated the psychoanalytic formulas, and often applies them with an ingenuous cocksureness that makes one smile. As a critic she is feminine in the sense that if she likes an author she hoists him sky-high with her approval, and if she disapproves he is buried beneath a heap of stones and flattened beneath her shovel.

In Part One of "The Strange Necessity" Miss West makes a brilliant start, and her courageous exposition of "Ulysses," of its human, social, and esthetic significance is, I think, as good as any yet written on that fecund, amorphous work. Miss West has, in my opinion, overrated the book's permanent appeal, but if she magnifies its symbolic humanity she also berates the author for his "extraordinary incompetence." "I do most solemnly maintain that Leopold Bloom is one of the greatest creations of all time . . . Marion Bloom . . . in the last forty-two pages becomes one of the most tremendous summations of life that have been caught in the net of art." And she explains why "Ulysses" has been received as a sort of supplementary messianic tablet of the Law: "It is the liberation of a suppressed tendency." Well! each generation to its taste, and the next generation may find this Gargantuan "liberation" of the oppressions and inhibitions too encyclopaedic.

The flow of Miss West's critical observations is agreeably diversified by her retrospections, descriptions, and perceptions of Paris as she walks down the Rue de Rivoli after visiting her dressmaker and lawyer and buying a copy of "Pomes Penyeach" at Sylvia Beach's workshop. Her descriptive vignettes are charmingly fresh and we are getting on famously till in an unfortunate hour she plunges knee-deep into a quagmire of pseudo-scientific theorizing. Professor Pavlov's "Conditioned Reflexes" and his study of the "investigatory reflexes" of dogs becomes the basis for her examination of "why does art matter?" and of "the mystery of the effects of the artist's activity on other people." One would have thought that nothing was simpler. Take as an example of a work of architectural art, Canterbury Cathedral. How should it not affect us all, in varying degrees? But Miss West is fiercely determined to prove the materialities between the masterpieces of art and letters, of music and architecture and Professor Pavlov's physiological demonstrations. So soon we learn that a "super-cortex" of art exists! But let us quote one of the most luminous passages:

I find it not hard to believe that the organism, having caused an organ to make itself within us, which is called the cortex, whose business it is to pick out of the whole complexity of the environment those units which are of significance and to integrate those units into an excitatory complex that shall set its instinctive reflexes working, should find itself in consequence over-burdened with experiences created by this organ, which in their crude state are as unprofitable to it as the whole complexity of its environment and its reflexes would be without this organ; and that the organism, being on the whole satisfied with the way the cortex works, causes another to make itself on much the same lines, to perform the same analytic and excitatory functions, which shall similarly make experience profitable to the individual.

And there you have it! the way how "Ulysses" the product of the excitatory complexes of his time . . . pressing on the individuality which is called James Joyce," so affected the functioning of Miss Rebecca West's "investigatory reflexes" that her

"excitatory complex" warned her that if she was "to get on with her biological job of adapting herself to her environment" she "must turn her back utterly on all direct experience and immerse herself in 'Ulysses.'" What could be simpler? Miss West struggles with Professor Pavlov and her materialistic confusions remind us of an enterprising baby with a bucket of tar. Everything round her gets horribly smeared. And from this theory of the "super-cortex of art" and the "excitatory reflexes" we finally, of course, get nothing but a scanty crop of mere commonplaces, such as:—"We have strong grounds for suspecting that art is at least in part a way of collecting information about the universe." What originality! When Miss West drops pseudo-science and the decorticated dogs she gives us good measure, as in her admirable analysis of "Adolphe." On Proust too she is excellent, and she surrenders herself to his super-analytic method with the immense gratitude of a patient whose confidence in the skill of a great surgeon has been fully justified. "He is a god," she repeats. "Never does he fail." And after quoting an apposite passage from Jane Austen she exclaims oracularly "Do not these passages and thousands like them make one suspect there is a very close resemblance between art and science, so close that we might say that art is science, only more scientific?"

And here we perceive that Miss West, with the younger generation, dreads above all things being taken in by appearances and by fine sentiments. So



Illustration from Washington Irving's "Knickerbocker History of New York," by James Daugherty (Doubleday, Doran).

art must be proved to be more scientific than science if she is to trust to it! And we are only safe in trusting what authors tell us if we accept their words, at the lowest valuation, say at least twenty-five per cent below the estimate of their most sceptical biographers! The lady is not to be taken in. "It is utterly incredible," says Miss West, "that Beethoven, who was a crawling snob, who cheated his publishers, who was false to his friends and benefactors, and behaved like a petulant hysteric in his family affairs, should have built his music on such an experience." How Miss West does dot her i's! But her love of over-emphasis leads her often on to very shaky ground; as when she writes of Joseph Conrad: "Change was his idol. He longed to change himself from a Pole to an Englishman; from an intellectual to a man of action. In his writing he exercised his love of change; he would think a sentence in Polish, change it in his mind to French, change it on paper to English."

The smart journalist pops up repeatedly in Miss West's pronouncements, as when she remarks, "The Great War has not produced, nor seems likely to produce, any art that matters a halfpenny." Has she not heard of Wilfred Owen? Has she ever read his "Poems," 1920, or are they beyond her comprehension? For when she utters the exciting word War, she is apt to become as sentimental as a flapper or as a nurse-maid gazing open-eyed at a red-coated soldier. "A great soldier," she cries, "is one of the few human achievements which make it conceivable that God will sorrow at the cooling of the earth." For this reason, her contemptuous ref-

erence to "the soldiers in Mr. Siegfried Sassoon's poetry" is what one expects from writers who were enthusiastically active in the home trenches. Her testimony to Mr. Tomlinson and "Gallions Reach" is grateful and genuine and flows round and round and away from its subject with accomplished facility. Perhaps the best essay—no slight praise—is the one entitled "Mr. Lewis Introduces Gantry." Here Miss West pounces like a hawk on the fundamental weakness of the novel and points out that you cannot be a satirist of religious impostors unless you yourself have a true sense of religion. "If Mr. Lewis would sit still . . ." says the critic and we dissolve in shouts of laughter. "The Tosh Horse," an indictment of Miss Ethel M. Dell, contains also excellent criticisms and Miss West is most amusing in "Uncle Bennett," a survey of "The Big Four," Wells, Shaw, Galsworthy, and Bennett. Here Sister West's peculiar gift of administering stiff doses of medicine to her ward of literary patients, with a bright, imperious smile, serves her well. It is needless to say that she does not even glance at "Uncle Bennett's" finest creations. She does not mean to, but having patronized and chidden "Uncle Bennett," she then opens the gate.

Miss West's brilliant generalizations on Dostoevsky's theory concerning intellectual *émigrés* are strangely buttressed on the example of the group of Anglo-Irish writers, Sheridan, Wilde, Synge, Shaw, George Moore, and Yeats. "Wild, wild is the *émigré*, the *déraciné*," she exclaims, adding to them as sad proofs of her theory, Henry James and Joseph Conrad! Her tragic examples of those unsuccessful handicapped writers, Sheridan and Mr. Bernard Shaw, she naturally passes by in silence. And as to George Moore's and Yeats' literary futures had they stuck in Dublin, about this Miss West prudently also says nothing. It is also strange, is it not, that that "great work" "Ulysses" should have been created by so eminent an *émigré* as Mr. James Joyce? In fact Dostoevsky's theory, which Miss West discusses with no little acumen, is as badly served by the Anglo-Irish group, called to witness on its behalf, as can well be. But if Miss West cannot get hold of Truth, like a clever advocate she puts the Half Truths into her witness-box and confidently claims a verdict. She is really very clever and her oratorical effects would win over nine stupidified juries out of ten. Her concluding essay, "Tribute to Some Minor Artists," a description of her home in the French Riviera, is charming and suggests that she should give her creative spirit more play. If only she had left Professor Pavlov and his 'decorticated dogs' alone!

## An American Myth

THE MAKING OF BUFFALO BILL. By RICHARD J. WALSH, in collaboration with MILTON S. SALSBERY. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. 1928.

Reviewed by BERNARD DE VOTO

IT was William F. Cody's fortune to become in his own lifetime a culture-hero and to express in his own person a myth that erected America's heroic age into a ritualistic system. Those of us who can remember gasoline torches flaring on that magnificent white hair while an autochthonous demigod rode grandly round a tent, have seen an Iliad, a Beowulf, a Song of Roland crystallizing before our eyes. For the hazards of the frontier were, during two and a half centuries, the splendid adventure of the American imagination, and the skills and crafts that they developed were our national daydream. The time came when the heroic age must end—when the Indian was beaten and the buffalo killed, when the stage coach and the Pony Express succumbed to progress, when ambush was no longer a peril to the wayfarer—and that is exactly the moment, in all mythologies, when the genius of a people creates a hero in its image. Chance, abetted by sound publicity, selected Cody for a symbol. He became, to the popular mind, the realized essence of the age that had produced such diverse figures as Daniel Boone and Mad Anthony Wayne, William Ashley and Old Gabe Bridger, Merriwether Lewis and Kit Carson—and of the rigorous craft they had practised. Also, displaying the splendor of the old America for hire, he expressed the spirit of the new America and went out to make a fortune.

In the West, in my boyhood, realistic veterans made no secret of Cody's comparative inexperience at the craft he exhibited for pay. Now Mr. Walsh supplies details. That Cody was a splendid shot and better than an average army scout there is no