

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

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### The Subject of Poetry

MR. THORNWELL HAYNES, reviewing in the Asheville *Sunday Citizen* a recent anthology of poetry, "The Lyric South," makes heartfelt lament that the poets there represented, and indeed poets in general, still confine themselves to traditional themes instead of falling in line with the new forces which a mechanical and scientific age has generated. "The great movement of power to-day, the sweep of vehicles which move themselves, the sunlight of past ages filling our nights full of light, the listening of whispers a thousand miles away, the march of science more awesome than 'an army with banners,' these are 'epic achievements' which he feels should constitute the subject matter of poetry as much if not instead of the usual *motifs* of nature and living and loving and dying.

Now Mr. Haynes, it seems to us, is wrong on two counts; first, in believing that they have not to a considerable degree of late been material of poetry, and second, in believing that except as symbols they are material of poetry. As to the first, in many quarters for the past fifteen years it has been held as a reproach against poetry that it has been too much concerned with the immediate and the commonplace, too inclined to regard the usual, the useful, or the scientific as the stuff of poetry. Beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, and a stone wall, a telegraph wire, or an aeroplane one and all may or may not be fit subjects for poetry. Kipling triumphantly proved long ago that a cable could admirably serve as a springboard to verse, but he proved it because he saw in it the modern miracle and not the mechanical thing. On the other hand, the recent Lindbergh prize poem contest demonstrated completely how inadequate to evoke real poetry such a theme as "people flying across the ocean" (one of Mr. Haynes's suggestions for a subject) is likely to be in the hands of the versifiers.

Poetry, after all, is a matter not of subject, but of treatment. Any subject is poetic if poetically handled, and the most majestic theme prose if prosaically presented. What makes the commonplace poetic, or invests the scientific with glamorous meaning, is the ability of the poet's imagination to charge it with feeling, to make it connotative and moving. If great poetry in the main has dealt with living and loving and dying, with the beauty of nature rather than with its scientific aspects, it is because living and loving and dying are the facts of existence that most profoundly concern mankind and most profoundly agitate them, because nature is what exalts and soothes them, and because all alike arouse that emotion which, recollected in tranquillity, is poetry.

It is not the measurement of the electronic universe (another of Mr. Haynes's suggestions as a subject for poetry) which is a poetic conception, but the fact of an electronic universe which is inflaming to the imagination, not the "sweep of vehicles which move themselves," but all that that sweep indicates of human energy and the surge of human society. Those are things that are not of to-day or yesterday or to-morrow, but of all time. They are the eternal verities that are sempiternally amazing and uplifting, and will still have power to move men's hearts and minds when the device that measured the electron has been discarded for a better, and the vehicles that move themselves have been supplanted by others impelled by force external to themselves. To ask that poetry be timely in the sense that it record the incidents of human achieve-

### Epitaphs

UPON A VIRGIN

(Who Died While Her Maids Slept)

By S. FOSTER DAMON

WE woke, dazed with the midnight cry:  
The Destined Groom had stolen by;  
While we were dark with dreams of day,  
He found where the lost Princess lay.  
We heard the clamor of his horns  
Departing from the Keep of Thorns,  
And strove to light our empty lamps  
Beneath the vaulted shades and damp,  
To find only the empty dress  
Of her limp body's loveliness.

UPON AN INVALID

HERE without any pain she may  
Recuperate till Judgment Day,  
For centuries are hardly hours  
Beneath the quick feet of the flowers.

### An Intellectual in Politics\*

By J. W. T. MASON

THE recent death of Lord Asquith (to shorten his title and retain his identity) marked the passing of the last leader of Victorian liberalism. His was the grand manner of the intellectual and cultured esthete in politics, which left both himself and the British liberal party in the quagmire of utilitarian doubt and indecision, lost and forsaken.

Gladstone, struggling to establish political equality and curb political class privilege, bequeathed a heritage of parliamentary accomplishment and a tradition that the world could be set right by means of liberal political formulæ. His successors in the liberal party did not know, however, and Lord Asquith among the least of them, that political equality is not in itself an end but only a means to an end. Political equality is a step toward economic equality and this is the real goal toward which modern democracy is working—a utilitarian ideal, not a political and intellectualist ideal.

British liberalism sought to elevate the standard of living of the masses, but in terms of the price of a loaf of bread, while the masses eventually want, and rightly want, a standard of living in terms of the price of a motor car. Bread may be assured to all by parliamentary edict, but not motor cars. That is to say, legislatures may prevent starvation among the masses, but they cannot by law give the people more than the people produce. Wealth comes from work not from parliaments. Politically, man can safeguard his freedom; but, his standard of living in the end depends on his economic productivity.

British liberalism, after Gladstone to Asquith, failed to show a practical appreciation of this fact and was unable to change the direction of its leadership from political to economic well-being. It held to a few old shibboleths and waited in perplexity while the labor party advanced into power, reducing the liberals to the position of a well-nigh negligible bloc in the House of Commons. But, the British laborites, in turn, have not yet realized that wealth comes from work. Instead of accepting that principle, which requires so much sacrifice of leisure and such risks as accompany the replacement of manpower by machinepower, they have evaded it by evolving political plans to raise the economic level of the workers through government control or ownership of industry assuring special treatment for labor.

The British liberals were bent on abolishing political privilege; the laborites in the House of Commons have sought to create a new economic privilege. Liberalism under Lord Asquith could not check this latter movement and liberalism has paid the penalty. In the United States liberalism, perhaps by the fortunate fact of the economic individualism which accompanies the pioneer spirit, realized that work makes wealth. The trade unionism of America has refused to seek its salvation at the hands of Congress, but by the hands of labor—a difference so vast that it caused British labor leaders to consider the late Samuel Gompers (himself, English born) a heretic for his acceptance of the American way and his leadership of it.

Lord Asquith's failure to understand the basic problem of economic freedom which confronted the liberal party in his time, was fundamentally due to his own incapacity for thinking in utilitarian terms,

\*MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS 1852-1827. By the EARL OF OXFORD AND ASQUITH, K. G. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1928. Two vols. \$10.

### This Week

"The Log of 'Bob' Bartlett."  
Reviewed by Marie Ahnighito Peary.

"Essays by Christopher Morley."  
Reviewed by Chauncey B. Tinker.

"The Pure in Heart."  
Reviewed by Grace Frank.

"The Right to Happiness."  
Reviewed by Ernest Sutherland Bates.

Adventure in Hoboken.  
By Christopher Morley.

Poems of the Machine Age.  
By MacKnight Black.

"Balzac and Souverain."  
Reviewed by E. Preston Dargan.

"Lincoln or Lee."  
Reviewed by L. E. Robinson.

"Psychological Care of Infant and Child."  
Reviewed by F. L. Wells.

A Letter from Switzerland.  
By René Rapin.

Next Week, or Later  
The Modern English Novel.  
By Wilbur L. Cross.

ment rather than the fact of human endeavor, the accomplishments of mankind rather than its yearnings, its pains, and its joys, is to ask that poetry stultify itself by becoming description instead of expression. To demand that it be timely in the sense that it deal with the universe in the light of the implications that make it of moment to mankind, is to put an enormous burden upon it, but it is to ask of it only that without which it can have no existence.



which are rougher than intellectualistic terms and suffer no subterfuges for long in testing results. A little learning is not as dangerous a thing as too much learning. "Margot" Asquith, to whom the present volumes are dedicated, has contributed a preface giving an admirable outline sketch of her husband's temperament. She says he appeared to watch the "vagaries" of his cabinet colleagues "more as an umpire than as a judge"; and she pictures him as having had to overcome "his natural intellectual scorn" and cultivating "a tolerance with his fellow-creatures." His choice of the title "Lord Oxford and Asquith" when he was raised to the peerage, shows, too, his last love as his first was for scholastic interests. With him intellectuality was an esthetic adornment and he could be priggish about it—as witness in these volumes his scoffing remarks about the poor French spoken by his cabinet colleagues attending allied conferences during the agonizing period of the first years of the war. Balfour, among those whose French was not entirely to Lord Asquith's liking, is more the true intellectual than Lord Asquith ever was. Balfour has made contributions of high value to intellectualist literature; but not Lord Asquith, who was only an amateur in this intellectualist world of his own choosing.

This is not to say his final "autobiography" contains nothing of interest. None of its pages should be skipped. Time and again, between placid paragraphs burst forth revelations which give a new aspect to obscure events and enlarge present knowledge of our times. In previous books, Lord Asquith had written of his life, but earlier recollections do not reveal the man as do these, his final words about himself, his friends and enemies. Nobody can afford to neglect Lord Asquith's pages who desires to study the forces of democratic government as they evolve haltingly and so often go astray within the secret recesses of the minds of the most sincere statesmen.

The early chapters contain amiable comments on men and events, dominated from the start by the natural bent of the author's mind toward intellectual judgments. One fails to find a broad humanism or any evidence of a realization of the profound forces beneath the surface, which were showing the disappointment of democracy that political liberty has not of itself brought about a fair distribution of economic wealth nor made higher production of goods automatically certain. There are, however, interesting glimpses of personalities from the Asquith viewpoint.

Lord Bryce is called the "best educated" man of the time in politics. An incident is related at a luncheon given in London, when Bryce "severely corrected" Theodore Roosevelt who had made a mistake over "some intricacies of the American constitution." One wishes the conversation might have been in the days of the radio with the possibility of listening in.

Much has been published lately about Queen Victoria's antagonism to Gladstone. Little is known of Gladstone's remarks in the privacy of his personal circle, about the Queen. Lord Asquith prints a letter written by Victoria to Gladstone from Windsor Castle in 1893, charging him with insufficiently informing her about a parliamentary bill for suspending claims founded on vested Church interest in Wales. Victoria, in dismay, added that the bill was "as Mr. Asquith admitted, the first step towards the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England!! . . . The Queen trusts Mr. Gladstone may yet pause before taking so disastrous a step as to attempt to disestablish part of the English Church of which she is the Head and of which she always thought Mr. Gladstone was a loyal member."

Lord Asquith relates that Gladstone sent him a copy of "this curious fulmination" with a note asking for information and saying: "The enclosed is in no way formidable except that it will entail on me the necessity of writing rather a long letter. . . . Her Majesty's studies have not yet carried her out of the delusive belief that she is still by law the 'head' of the Church of England." Lord Asquith does not recall his answer, but he has no doubt Her Majesty's reference to what he supposedly had said "was founded on a complete misapprehension."

Interspersed among such reminiscences, Lord Asquith gives lively opinions about clubs, women in politics, the pulpit, and the press. He has his suspicions of journalism, though not entirely agreeing with a remark he attributes to Bryce that the press

"seems the greatest danger ahead of Democracy." The end of the first volume carries the reader to the world war. Then follows the author's description of the war government, notes jotted down as the conflict blazed, revealing democratic statesmanship gone mad. There have been other accounts of the turmoil among the members of the Asquith war ministries, but none equalling Lord Asquith's own telling. Bickerings, defiances, conspiracies, incessant jealousies and antagonisms within the governing circle got into Lord Asquith's notes as if they were quite normal accompaniments of a nation's life and death struggle. The scenes described are almost incredible. Kitchener and French at each other's throats; Kitchener and Fisher pulling in opposite directions; McKenna and Lloyd George at odds; Winston Churchill passing under Balfour's influence and seeking to oust Grey as foreign minister; this minister and that ever distrustful and combatting first one and then another of his colleagues. As Lord Asquith reveals them, his cabinets seem to have been a Bedlam of omnipotents, each contending Jove confident he could win the war singlehanded if only left to his own thunderbolts. Yet, perhaps it is one of the glories of democracy that the democratic spirit which abounds in Great Britain trains men so badly to play the part of amateur autocrat. Somehow, in the end democracy muddled through the war more efficiently than did the professional autocrats on the other side.

Amid all the muddling, Lord Asquith stood by, largely a spectator, though sometimes interjecting his authority to stop the clatter for a time. But, ever it broke out anew. It would have required a man of enormous personal prestige and great natural powers of command to have maintained discipline and compelled coöperation to the full among these wranglers. Lord Asquith was not born for such a post. He showed no particular weakness; rather, his notes suggest an intellectual aloofness, as if he were not quite certain what it was all about and as though, too, it were not in accord with liberal ideas of political freedom to knock the heads of the contestants together and keep them in their places. "Margot" is right. Her husband watched these "vagaries" of his colleagues "more as an umpire than as a judge." He did not condemn; he let the mêlée continue, occasionally blowing his whistle for time to part too violent contenders.

Democracy was politically leaderless. The ministers seemed as primitive and snarling as the fighting men at the front. Lord Asquith shows Lord Fisher at the Admiralty reaching a stage of megalomania reminiscent of the Hohenzollerns at their maddest. Fisher had once threatened to resign because his proposal to shoot all German prisoners in England in retaliation for the Zeppelin raids was not accepted. Being soothed after this rebuff, he later sent in his resignation, slammed down his desk because of a disagreement over the Dardanelles operations, and went away at a time when it was thought the German fleet was coming out. Lord Asquith here rose to unusual heights and ordered the recalcitrant sea lord to return, in the name of the King. This Fisher did, but only to insist that his resignation be accepted. He then outlined in a secret memorandum six conditions on which he would be willing to remain in active service and "guarantee the successful termination of the war." Lord Asquith prints this document, surely the most amazing state paper the war brought forth on either side. In one of his paragraphs Fisher demanded:

That I shall have complete professional charge of the war at the sea together with the absolute sole disposition of the Fleet and the appointments of all officers of all rank whatsoever and absolutely untrammelled sole command of all the sea forces whatsoever.

He added that his conditions must be published verbatim for the information of the fleet. To such a state of rasping squeaks the strain of the war had reduced this little cog in the wheel of the great British naval machine, which was inconvenienced in no way whatever by Fisher's passing.

At the front, Sir John French did not conceal his contempt for Kitchener in charge of the war office at home and was expressing himself in secret notes to Winston Churchill. Lord Asquith quotes "a very private letter" sent from French to "the adventurous Winston" in September, 1914, with the war as yet hardly begun. The British commander-in-chief notified Winston that if his little force were multiplied by six, "he would get to Berlin in six weeks without French help."

Out of charity, one can only assume the phrase

was not meant seriously by French, but was a disguised criticism of Kitchener for not sending him men fast enough. However, those were days when ignorance for a brief period was bliss and it was folly to be wise to the actuality of the situation, for nobody could be made to believe in the dreadful collapse of civilization that was threatening. As for Winston, Lord Asquith was never able to accustom himself to his gyrations. There is a reference to Winston's "tragi-comedy" proposal that he, an ex-lieutenant of Hussars, resign as First Lord of the Admiralty and supersede the various generals in Belgium by taking command in person of the allied forces defending Antwerp. "I regard his future with many misgivings," Lord Asquith wrote in another connection, and then, elsewhere: "Winston was not at his best;" "Winston has been tactless;" "our two rhetoricians, Lloyd George and Winston, as it happens, have good brains of different types. But they can only think talking; just as some people can only think writing. Only the salt of the earth can think inside, and the bulk of mankind cannot think at all." This is an excellent example of Lord Asquith's own way of thinking.

Bonar Law greatly irritated him by his direct manner. The more courtly Balfour as leader of the opposition had been quite otherwise. Bonar Law was too indifferent about the niceties of parliamentary debate to win Lord Asquith's approval. He was the utilitarian, bent on results, not concerned with choice of words in stating them. "He was so offensive," Lord Asquith writes, describing a debate in the House of Commons on September 14, 1914, "that Illingworth and McKenna, who were sitting by me left the House, lest they should be unable to overcome their impulse to throw books, paper-knives, and other handy missiles at his head."

With such feelings toward opposition argument, with such a lack of capacity to maintain order among the disputing members of his government, it is hard to understand how Lord Asquith continued in office for some thirty months during the war, first as premier of the liberal war ministry and then as premier of the first coalition war ministry. Surely every chance was given him, but he could not exact results from his subordinates commensurate with the gigantic task confronting him.

Kitchener always meets with a kind word from Lord Asquith, possibly because both of them were involved in charges of inefficiency. French's accusation against the government and "Lord Kitchener in particular" of apathy in supplying munitions "teems with unpardonable inaccuracies," Lord Asquith declares. Of Kitchener's tragic attempt to reach Russia, he writes, "I have always thought and still think that his arrival there might have deflected the subsequent course of history."

Between Lord Asquith, the esthetic intellectual, and Lloyd George, the man of direct action and little intellectualism, not much in common existed. Lord Asquith gives no evidence of ranking Lloyd George's statesmanship highly, while admitting his shrewdness. Early in the conflict, Lloyd George sought to stimulate efficiency at home by drastically curbing the national drink habit. "His mind," wrote Lord Asquith, "apparently oscillates from hour to hour between two poles of absurdity, cutting off all drink from the workingman—which would lead to something like a universal strike—or buying out the whole liquor trade of the country and replacing it by a huge State monopoly."

One now would hardly describe the second alternative at least, as an "absurdity." However, at the time, Lord Asquith found consolation in it, though disapproving, because studying the drink problem so occupied Lloyd George's attention that he was restrained from quarrelling with other members of the government.

Lord Asquith evidently felt he had been betrayed when Lloyd George succeeded him as premier of the war coalition. He gives publicity to the following note he made on March 29, 1915, when newspaper reports were circulating about the possibility of a cabinet breakup:

I had an extraordinary and really very interesting talk with L. G. . . . He declared that he owed everything to me, that I had stuck to him and protected him and defended him when every man's hand was against him and that he would rather (1) break stones, (2) dig potatoes, (3) be hung and quartered (these were metaphors used at different stages of his broken, but impassioned harangue) than do an act or say a word or harbor a thought that was disloyal to me and he said that every one of his colleagues felt the same.