

The Good Old Days

OLD LOUISIANA. By LYLE SAXON. Illustrated by E. H. SUYDAM. New York: The Century Company. 1929. \$5.

Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL

IF Mr. Saxon's charming "footnotes to history," which excellent phrase is borrowed from the blurb of his new book, does not send a good many touring Americans into Louisiana and Mississippi in search of the fast-disappearing fragments of a fine architecture and a delightful culture, it will mean that there are fewer people in this country really tired and bored with contemporary life than one gathers from stray conversations. What greater relief could there be for a New Yorker, with his eyes full of upthrusting towers, propelled heavenward in most instances by no other force than human vanity, and of no especial importance except as monuments to the lack of originality and taste on the part of their architects, than to spend a month, in the Spring let us say, among the plantation houses Mr. Suydam has drawn so well in "Old Louisiana?" These were houses built to live in; the earlier "raised cottage" that has come to be recognized as typical of Louisiana, was exactly suited to the climate for which it was built. It was open to the air, with a generous and friendly face to the world. The later "great houses" in the classical tradition were also good; they had dignity and stateliness, they stood for gracious leisure, and they were as far apart from current domestic architecture as the life they sheltered is apart from the life we know today.

Mr. Saxon's book is a pot pourri of stories taken from old documents, of chapters about families that he has seen in the process of "going to pieces," of quotations from letters and diaries, of descriptions of some of the remaining plantation houses, and of incidents and episodes in the early history of Louisiana every one of which has its interest and value. The volume does not seem to have any especial plan, but the result is just as sure as if it had, and this result is a vivid evocation of the life of the most romantic state in the Union—he who questions this statement should remember his etymology. One finds out how the early American settlers fared after the Louisiana Purchase had opened the territory; one reads how a youthful Creole spent his days visiting among the various branches of his family and his friends, pretending the meanwhile to study Blackstone; one reads an unforgettable story of how a French dancing master called Baby put up a gallant fight against marauding redskins, and how a slave, the mistress of her master, worked a strange revenge upon her master's wife.

One reads, too, with a good deal of sadness of how many of the magnificent old plantation houses have tumbled into the maw of the Mississippi River, and how many more have burned, and how many more there are that are deserted and falling rapidly into ruins. Here and there a decaying remnant of an old family clings to its ancestral mansion, lending a ghostly semblance of life to the premises, and in instances even more rare wealthy people have restored the old houses and are living in them. It requires wealth for this last. The great houses were the flower of the slave system, just as was the gracious culture they sheltered, and they are not to be restored, unfortunately, without the expenditure of much more money than most people are willing or able to put out. Some of the places in Natchez, Mississippi, which is just across the river from Louisiana, are being preserved, but others are doomed. They should be preserved as souvenirs of a period when sheer living for the sake of living reached its peak in this country.

Mr. Saxon devotes an entire chapter to an attempted solution of the mystery of the identity of Simon Legree, and gathers together evidence to show that a Louisiana planter named Robert McAlpin, a native of New England, was the prototype of Mrs. Stowe's villain. He quotes a large collection of amusing negro proverbs. He describes a recent Christmas on a plantation—there are still some plantation houses left—he paints a picture of a jamboree in the Cane River neighborhood, where he lives and writes. As I have said, the book is an olla podrida, but all the ingredients are good, and some of them are very good.

Those who saw Mr. Saxon's "Fabulous New Orleans" will not have to be told that E. H. Suydam's pencil is an extraordinarily fine medium for catching and transferring to paper the beauty and

the romance of old buildings and old scenes, and for this reader, Mr. Suydam has fairly outdone himself in "Old Louisiana." From the drawing of the Uncle Sam plantation buildings, which is used as end-papers, to the very last sketch of a corner of a neglected family burying-ground, he has given both an accurate and a delightful series of pictures, and his drawings of the plantation houses might serve as studies for architects. For practical purposes at the present time, the houses of the classical period are not of much use, but why the South ever abandoned its "raised cottages," or, for that matter, the design of the old four-room log cabin, with a fourteen-foot open hall between the two paired rooms, for California bungalows and "Spanish" houses, is just one more of life's unsolvable mysteries.

Mr. Saxon's book ought to be about right for Christmas, if you know any one who is interested in Americana, or who has Southern ancestors, or who loves beautiful houses, or, for that matter, who is interested in anything except the closing prices of the thirty leading stocks.



The Elizabethan Theatre from a Contemporary Sketch. (Theatre Arts print.)

The World Theatre

THE THEATRE. By SHELDON CHENEY. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1929. \$10.

Reviewed by DONALD OENSLAGER

MR. CHENEY has written the first comprehensive work on the history of the World Theatre in the English language. There are many books that approach theatre history in a brief way, generally emphasizing but one side of theatre activity, for instance, the actors's or the playwright's. Hitherto Mantzius, the Danish author (whose works are translated), has alone held the distinction of writing a complete survey in his six large volumes of material, stimulating to read, but in many respects of dubious authenticity. Unquestionably Mr. Cheney deserves no small praise for the very accomplishment of such a feat.

He develops his subject from a threefold approach—"the drama, the physical theatre, and the craft of staging"—and observes these ingredients of the theatre contract and expand under the restless heat of an audience three thousands years old. The following passage sounds the true depth of his understanding of the theatre in relation to contemporary life:

Just so, in regarding the larger composition of the world theatre, the student or interested playgoer—or reader—must vision a similar binding force, a theatrical unity, a deeper all-pervading essence; for it is this that lends design to the actor in relation to the drama, the physical theatre and the craft of staging. And it is this that I shall try to keep forward throughout my story of the "theatre art."

Such a book cannot fail to assume monumental proportions. The book itself has the size and appearance of a German-English Dictionary. It outlines the theatre even as Mr. Wells outlined civilization. To manage his campaign Mr. Cheney must obviously rely on the aid of eminent authorities of periods or tendencies in theatre history. J. J. Frazer, E. K. Chambers, Arthur Pougin, and Alardyce Nicoll are but a few of his distinguished

aides. Audience, actors, playwrights, directors, designers, architects, musicians, *et al.* are well marshalled and move forward steadily and easily from century to century. He presents his forces first exuberant behind primitive masks; then in solemn formation encircling the orchestra of the theatre of Dionysus; after Roman holidays they are singed with the ecstatic fires of Christianity and find shelter in Gothic cathedrals. With breathless excitement they tread lightly over the highly polished parquets of the Renaissance, and after a final frenzy of Romantic attitudinizing, these now serious thinkers take base refuge behind the theatre's fourth wall to better hold the mirror to the problems of its audience.

The material for this world excursion is finely proportioned and is handled compactly; yet its compactness is concealed by simple and imaginative writing. Mr. Cheney always manages to capture the illusion of a period that is most appropriate to the theatrical life it frames. He writes magically of the past in terms of the present. And voicing dissatisfaction with the present theatre, he vividly conjures before you the glamour of the older theatre. And of the next theatre Mr. Cheney can discern more luminous shadows than are cast by the present bright lights of Broadway. These new shadows are cast by the high lights of those who have forged traditions in the theatre of the past.

Such a broad view of theatre life evolves itself into a readable record that never allows one to become conscious of over five hundred pages of plans and time-tables. One cannot but wish, though, that Mr. Cheney had held off for several years and produced a thoroughly scholarly work that might do more than suggest the history of the theatre in modern dress. "The Theatre" comes so close to real achievement, one feels entitled to judge Mr. Cheney's contribution from the highest possible standards—"All or nothing." Its merit can best be judged by what he has eliminated. Naturally many ghosts arise. If Vigarani (Louis XIV's scene-painter) is included, why not De Louthembourg, the "Prince of Scene Painters," whom Garr esteemed so highly as to pay him five hundred pounds a year for his scenic innovations introduced on the stage of Drury Lane? In the influence of the "Freie Bühne" and "Théâtre Libre" are emphasized, what about the Duke of Meiningen's Company, whose style left its mark on the theatres of Europe from Berlin to Moscow? And so, too, what about Mme. Vestris? Have not these all contributed vitally to the life of our theatre today?

Regardless of such questionably judicious omissions, "The Theatre" cannot fail to become a valuable standard work. But a standard work should carry more weight today—a kind of weight that might, with more distinguished research, have brought more scholarly credit to Mr. Cheney's fine literary reputation, as well as to the literature of the theatre.

Memory and Pilgrimage

THE WET FLANDERS PLAIN. By HENRY WILLIAMSON. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HAROLD KING

THOSE who wonder whether the recent interest in war-books is more than a fickle change in public taste will find an answer in the first pages of this book. Mr. Williamson describes that impelling force which drives the old soldier towards anything that enables him to recapture the war years in memory, and that more obvious but equally powerful force that compels him in his turn to tell what he knows. There is a sense that something of oneself was left behind with the bodies of the fallen, that "I am dead with them, and they live in me again,"—a mystical experience of unity in comradeship that left an almost tangible need in the soldier's life when war ended. There is a demand that men must never again go ignorantly into such a cataclysm; the war must be described, again and again if necessary, so that, if men must still choose to fight, it will be with full understanding.

Mr. Williamson is one of those rare men who was a front-line soldier through practically the whole of the war. Nine years later he felt compelled to go back to the battlefields, as it were on a pilgrimage. Every soldier who served in France knows the feeling. What one expects to find is difficult to define. Those deserted and shattered vil-

lages, so sacred in memory, have been rebuilt, and the plough has furrowed many times across no-man's land, yet even in their newness they should hold something of the old, richer than memory.

This book is a diary of Mr. Williamson's nine-day travels. It begins on the two notes suggested above, memory and pilgrimage. Old and new are skilfully intermingled; wraiths of ten years ago move convincingly among living buyers and sellers. Gradually, however, a discord swells into dominance. Tours of the battlefields run everywhere; Hill 60 is a camp of souvenir sellers; Death Trench "as it was during the war" may be seen for one franc. The agony of a generation is reduced to the level of a peep-show. Mr. Williamson turns homewards with a voice in his ears: "What you seek is lost for ever in the ancient sunlight, which arises again as Truth." The comradeship of suffering endures in the memory and in a few works of art; all trace is gone from these battlefields reconquered by the vulgarities of civilization.

The book is a series of vignettes, done with that delicate skill of which Mr. Williamson is master. It is deep and tender and moving, and will probably rank with the few really great books of the war. The style is as beautiful as ever, and its rare power of conveying the charm of the English countryside is as successful with the ruin and the gaudy resurrection of the wet Flanders plain. It is work of high quality, yet it may have difficulties for some American readers, especially those of the younger generations, to whom the war is history, uncolored by those intimate familiarities that memory loves. For four years the country described was no less English than England, its details more significant to Englishmen than those of their own island, and Mr. Williamson writes as one of them for others who shared his experiences. The want of this background may make it a little more difficult to penetrate to the innermost secrets of the book. Yet this is almost niggling criticism. "The Wet Flanders Plain" is most beautiful, the more so that its quiet wistfulness is far removed from the force and horror of most war books.

Irish Peasantry

ADRIGOOLE. By PEADAR O'DONNELL. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DIARMUID C. RUSSELL

THE Irish peasantry may be glad a pen so sympathetic as Mr. O'Donnell's has been used in writing about them. It has considerable powers of expression and it does not misrepresent the western coast of Ireland or the people who live there. In this latest novel it writes about Adrigoole, a county of the most lovely scenery where hills purple with heather fill the horizon and everywhere are lakes and streams. But there too the bones of the earth have broken through its flesh and the farms which here and there scatter the mountains and the valleys use land wrenched from rock and bog. Hughie Dalach is born there. When the proper age comes to him, economic pressure forces him, as it does so many from the west coast, to go to the hiring fair. There, twenty dollars for the summer buys his labor for a farmer from another and wealthier part of the country. Mr. O'Donnell knows his Donegal. Those that cannot be used on the farm must go outside to work for the few dollars that make all the difference between existence and emigration. And what farms for people to cling to so desperately.

The rocks were sharp-edged, deep-rooted, broadfaced; the patches of soil were twisted around granite boulders; there were no ploughs, only spades; no horses, only donkeys. Hughie Dalach had a jennet. And the farms were tasselled at the mountain boundary with roots of heather that pushed downwards; eating downward, waiting for the men below to weaken; waiting; to go back without feeling from a push upward, and then again to wait.

This is the land Hughie Dalach has to farm when he settles down with the wife he finds for himself. For them begins the struggle that most in the West have to face. In the good years enough is made for existence. Nothing can be saved for the bad years, when blight comes to the potato fields and rain rots the corn. Nature is certain to win and with her gain comes destitution. It comes to the Dalachs. The husband in desperation tries his hand at illicit whiskey distillation and gets caught. The prison sentence that follows leaves his wife to look after the children and the farm, a barely possible task for

the two; impossible for one and that one a woman. The author finishes his tale with tragedy. Hughie comes home from prison to find his wife dead and the children nearly so from starvation. The obstinate pride of the Irish peasant will neither ask for aid nor bear the stigma of the poorhouse.

Donegal and the other counties of the West are a hard and barren land for the peasant. Mr. O'Donnell knows it and has a tenderness for that land. "Adrigoole" shows it; he has the kindness and sympathy that comes from knowledge and love and it makes this story one to read. I find "Adrigoole" very true and very moving. The book bears the stamp of talent and of individuality.

"C'est Maître François"

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL. By THOMAS WOLFE. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

IF it were customary to head reviews with a motto, like a chapter of Walter Scott, a review of "Look Homeward, Angel" might well take a phrase from Mr. Arthur Machen's "The Street Glory": "*C'est Maître François! Maître François en très mauvais humeur peut-être, mais Maître François tout de même!*" The analogy must not be pushed too far; there are of course many important differences, notably a violent emotional intensity in Mr. Wolfe that is entirely lacking in Rabelais, but they have the same fundamental and most unusual quality, a robust sensitiveness. Extraordinary keenness of perception usually makes a character like Roderick Usher or Des Esseintes, or, in real life, Proust, one who is forced to shut himself away from bright lights, loud sounds, and strong feelings, and occupies himself with infinitely cautious and delicate experiments upon himself. But Mr. Wolfe, like Rabelais, though plainly odors and colors and all stimuli affect him more intensely than most people, is happily able to devour sensations with an enormous vigor; his perceptions have a rare combination of fineness and largeness.

In manner, Mr. Wolfe is most akin to James Joyce, somewhere between the ascetic beauty of the "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" and the unpruned fecundity of "Ulysses"; but he resembles many other people by turns. His hero, Eugene Gant, amuses himself by registering at country hotels as John Milton or William Blake, or by asking for a cup of cold water and blessing the giver in his Father's name; so Mr. Wolfe amuses himself by writing here in the manner of one author and there of another. He will suddenly fall into a *dada* fantasia, such as often appears in *transition*, as:

A woman sobbed and collapsed in a faint. She was immediately carried out by two Boy Scouts . . . who administered first aid to her in the rest-room, one of them hastily kindling a crackling fire of pine boughs by striking two flints together, while the other made a tourniquet, and tied several knots in his handkerchief,—

and so on, and half a dozen pages later he will enumerate, in the painfully unimaginative manner of "An American Tragedy," the real holdings of Mrs. Gant:

"There were, besides, three good building-lots on Merrion Avenue valued at \$2,000 apiece, or at \$5,500 for all three; the house on Woodson Street valued at \$5,000," and so on for a page and a half. That is, it seems to be the great gift of Mr. Wolfe that everything is interesting, valuable, and significant to him. It must be confessed that he has just missed the greatest of gifts, that of being able to convey his interest to the ordinary reader.

Upon what was his vitality nourished? Rabelais fed on all the fulness of the French Renaissance, a dawn in which it was bliss to be alive; what would he have been like if he had been a poor boy in a small southern town, with a drunken father, a shrewish mother, and a family of quarreling brothers and sisters? Mr. Wolfe's answer seems to be that, in his childhood at least, he would have done unexpectedly well. Eugene, in pitifully cramped surroundings, somehow has a greater fullness of life than most boys have. From his father, especially, he draws some sense of Dionysian madness, of Falstaffian greatness. The teaching he has is very bad, but he gets somewhere, from it or from himself, a real feeling for Latin and Greek. His first money is earned on a paper route that takes him through the negro quarter, his first knowledge

of women comes from a negress who is in arrears to his company, yet he is never without a sense of the wonder and pain of desire and hunger. Years ago Mr. Tarkington said: "There's just as many kinds of people in Kokomo as there is in Pekin," but he carried little conviction, for his melodrama was too obviously arranged. It is Mr. Wolfe's contribution that he has drawn an unsparing picture of character and emotion. For those who can see it, there is everywhere a wealth of vitality that is almost enough.

But it is the little less, after all, and his town grows more insufficient as Eugene grows older. There is one chapter, in manner probably inspired by "The Waste Land," describing an afternoon in the square, with a running comment of quotations.

"Give me a dope, too."

"I don't want anything," said Pudge Carr. Such drinks as made them nobly wild, not mad. . .

Mrs. Thelma Jarvis, the milliner, drew, in one swizzling guzzle, the last beaded chain of linked sweetness long drawn out from the bottom of her glass. Drink to me only with thine eyes. . . She writhed carefully among the crowded tables, with a low rich murmur of contrition. Her voice was ever soft, gentle, and low—an excellent thing in a woman. The high light chatter of the tables dropped as she went by. For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love!

It is good enough, the town and the soda-water, but it should be so much better! A great company of poets are called on to set the beauties of the world against their pitiful analogues in Altamont. Mr. Wolfe's criticism of the narrowness of his hero's surroundings is the more bitter because he has done it such abundant justice.

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The bitterness grows when Eugene goes to the state university. Here Eugene, developing rapidly, becomes more difficult to understand, more difficult perhaps for his author to picture. It is often observable in books that begin with the birth of a boy that they grow confused as he approaches the age of the author. Here too the goat-foot that always belongs to the followers of Joyce is shown. Eugene becomes morbidly conscious of his physique, and yet unnaturally neglectful of it. He does not have his teeth filled or his hair cut; he does not bathe. He is naturally not popular, and he resents his want of popularity, in a way that is not far short of megalomania; he revolts against American sanitation and cleanliness, declaring that health is for fools, and great men have always shown signs in their lined faces of the disease of genius. Now this is hardly comprehensible, and hence hardly credible, even when the first two thirds of the book has given one the will to be as sympathetic as possible. There are possible reasons for Eugene's cult of dirt, ranging from a subconscious fear of impotence and a confused desire to be like the Horatian he-goat, *elentis mariti* (there is something like that in Mr. D. H. Lawrence), to a rankling sense of social inferiority, perverted by a fierce pride into a resolve to emulate the Fraternity Row aristocracy in nothing, not even in cleanliness (there is something like that in Mr. Wilbur Daniel Steele's "Meat"), through a dozen others. But Eugene here is not clear, as if Mr. Wolfe did not understand him, or understood him too well to think him worth explaining.

In the end Eugene is left wondering, with the same sense of the loneliness and greatness of the soul that informs the book from the beginning. "Look Homeward, Angel" though it has the faults of luxuriousness, has the great virtue that it always has the vision of something half-comprehensible behind the humdrum life, and that in the reading it carries conviction with it.

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