

## A New Sassoon

THE HEART'S JOURNEY. By SIEGFRIED SASSOON. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1929. \$2.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMEYER

THE publication of a new book by Siegfried Sassoon prompts the student of contemporary British poetry to speculate. The reader of those biennial collections published by The Poetry Bookshop must often wonder what has become of the Georgians, that group of which Sassoon was a late member. A peculiar fatality seems to have descended upon an entire generation of English poets. War accounted for the loss of Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, Francis Ledwidge, Isaac Rosenberg, Cameron Wilson, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Wilfred Owen; tuberculosis cut off James Elroy Flecker; something less definite, but as insidious, seems to have sapped the poetic vitality of John Masefield; Lascelles Abercrombie has turned to analytical prose; Ralph Hodgson has not written two verses in fifteen years. In the last decade what new star has been added to the once bright galaxy? Humbert Wolfe? But Wolfe is scarcely an unknown meteor; a watcher of the literary heavens might have charted him as early as 1918. What of the younger generation—the men and women in their twenties and early thirties? A glance at the American list of such “emerging” poets reveals Léonie Adams, Stephen Vincent Benét, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, George Dillon, Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, Elizabeth Coatsworth, Helene Mullins, Archibald MacLeish, Louise Bogan. Studying recent British poetry, the only “new” names of significance are Peter Quennell, whose idiom has barred him from popularity, and Roy Campbell, who happens to be a South African. . . . One turns back to Sassoon as one of the few who have outlived the war and outlasted a fashion.



Sassoon's literary development is as contradictory as it is curious. Descended from Persian Jews on his father's side, from a traditional English family on his mother's, Sassoon's boyhood was spent alternating between fox- and rhyme-hunting. He was divided between a love for rugged activity and pale Dawsonsque lyrics; several volumes of the latter being issued anonymously, privately printed and precious—in both senses of the word. A sense of their unreality drove him to a larger work, a poem which, beginning as a parody of Masefield, ended as a revealing and serious self-expression. The war came, finding Sassoon confused; he entered it, hailing it as a solution that was to be, primarily, a spiritual integration. But the battlefield and, worse, the trenches, stripped him of his dreams. The romantic youth longing to meet death “with a rifle in his hand,” saw moral death, and disintegration deeper than rotting bodies. His revulsion was recorded in some of the bitterest and most brilliant war-poems ever written. The nightmare over, Othello's occupation seemed gone; Sassoon could not continue writing poems on a subject requiring all his strength to forget, nor could he turn back to the limp lyrics of pre-Raphaelite youth. The first result was silence; then two small chiefly satirical, privately printed volumes issued, as before, anonymously; then (as far as the public was concerned) silence again.

And now, in “The Heart's Journey,” we have the distillation of these post-war years, of a decade of silence and sorrow, of long conflict and final unity. This volume and its natural complement, “The Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man,” give us both sides of the complete Sassoon, the richly molded, mature poet. Here are the visionary ideals of youth sharpened and purified through pain; here is bitter knowledge saved from bitterness by the essential spirit of faith; here, in short, Sassoon's Songs of Innocence are mingled with his Songs of Experience.

The wisdom of the world is this: To say, *There is No other wisdom but to gulp what time can give.*

To guard no inward vision winged with mysteries;  
To hear no voices haunt the hurrying hours we live;  
To keep no faith with gossamer friends; never to know  
Vigils of sorrow crowned when loveless passions fade . . .  
From Wisdom such as this to find my gloom I go,  
Companioned by such powers who keep me unafraid.

This is the accent, grave, searching, and sure, sounded again and again in these poems. The smallest of Sassoon's volumes physically, the largest in implications, it is strengthened by values that are not

dependent on situation, not conditioned by temperament or time. Many readings will not exhaust the beauty that is more than verbal in “Farewell to a Room,” “Strangeness of Heart,” “Grandeur of Ghosts,” “To One Who was with me in the War,” “From a Fugue by Bach,” “A Midnight Interior,” “The Power and the Glory,” “Conclusion,” the unfitted lines beginning “A flower has opened in my heart,” and this brief poem which, synthesizing his qualities, bids fair to last as long as anything Sassoon has created:

*‘When I’m alone’—the words tripped off his tongue  
As though to be alone were nothing strange.  
‘When I was young,’ he said, ‘when I was young . . .’  
I thought of age and loneliness and change.  
I thought how strange we grow when we’re alone,  
And how unlike the selves that meet, and talk,  
And blow the candles out, and say good-night.  
Alone . . . The word is life endured and known.  
It is the stillness where our spirits walk  
And all but inmost faith is overthrown.*

It is this “inmost faith” that shines through every stanza in this concentrated work. Out of the war, out of his self-imposed immolation, Sassoon has released the word which is life “endured and known.”

The only objectionable feature of “The Heart's Journey” is the price. The regrettable tendency to issue slim booklets for a fat fee is emphasized by these less than forty pages of verse for which the publishers ask two dollars. The printing of *belles lettres* is assuredly not a philanthropic act, but the publisher should meet the poetry-lover part if not half way. Or is it the publisher, and not the poet, who is trying to make verse “precious?” . . . There should be a law.

## Sombre People

THY DARK FREIGHT. By VERE HUTCHINSON. New York: Horace Liveright. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GLADYS GRAHAM

LANDS that lie close to northern waters undergo constant racking: they are wind-swept and sea-swept of all unessentials. The sands and rocks are bitten into sharp, fantastic shapes, the trees are bent to figures of fantastic angularity. There is no place for the merely pretty or graceful. And the people living by these waters grow to be like their land, character sharpens into its own extreme. What is not water tight and wind strong in house, in boat, in man,—that is destroyed. A hard land for a hard people.

Such is the land and the people of “Thy Dark Freight.” The novel is like a painting that needs to be viewed from a little distance. From too close the work seems out of proportion and the colors crude; from the best angle of vision colors and shapes fall into place, the picture becomes a convincing whole, and details are forgotten. So with Vere Hutchinson's story. In the reading there are strains on one's credulity, exaggerations, yet once the book is closed only the dark truth of the whole remains, the sombre and inevitable running of the sand through the glass.

Janetha Forde was no child of love. She was to her mother only the ugly proof of her father's brutality. This mark was upon her before she knew of it or could understand its significance. But she could understand that her father would have none of her—his hard, fanatic interest all lay in his warped religion of the little chapel; she knew her mother cared nothing for her, the passionate mother love running narrowly and swiftly to a son. So Janetha's life became her own.



Briefly, beautifully, she was able to give it to love; a few months only, then loneliness again, and her life to be taken up as a task. For Janetha's son had the “Goutby thwart,” that evil, threatening strain that flames into violence and worse down the generations, leaving free an individual now and then, as it left Janetha's lover, Yeo Goutby. But Yeo's strength and tenderness were caught by the sea before his son was born. Janetha, in utter poverty, in disgrace, with a baby whom she feared bore an ancient curse, began her long fight. The individual against heredity.

The life and character of Janetha stand out as the sharp focal point of “Thy Dark Freight,” but the other people, the horrible old Goutby, the half-witted Louie with her torture-splashed cats, the two landladies of the inn, and innumerable others, all

show that Vere Hutchinson is a creator of character who may be mentioned with Sheila Kaye Smith at her best; with Thomas Hardy. Her people are not comfortable, they are not people you know, but they are people who, after the author has done with them, exist.

## Mystic Revelation

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

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

MR. WILLIAMSON, whose “Tarka the Otter” was universally praised as a masterpiece among books about wild life, has followed it with another book which, though it has not the same unity of artistic effect, is far profounder and more moving. “The Pathway” is a novel of the English countryside, breathing in every chapter that love of ploughland and down, of thorn-trees and plovers and meadow-mice, that is planted so deep in the Englishman. Of late years we Americans have become conscientiously autochthonous; we have written a great deal about our closeness to the soil of our broad new country; we should like to believe ourselves sprung from dragon's teeth. But the truth is that, except for our real farmers, who do not write books, the English are far nearer to the earth than we. English gardens are a part of the house; winter and summer find their way indoors in England. And sometimes an Englishman who is also a poet writes a book, like “Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man” or “The Pathway,” which shows us how the English love their dear earth.

“The Pathway” is a book to make every reader ache with homesickness—townsmen for the country, Americans for England, Englishmen (I imagine) for Eden. For lovely as the world is, Mr. Williamson shows glimpses of a Paradise that might be if only men would follow nature. His hero, Maddison, has made his own interpretation of the message of the Truth, “Khristos,” whom he believes to have been manifest in Christ: sin is artificial; if we would be natural, all would be well. Maddison himself is one of those fine and tender spirits, like Socrates and Shelley, who inspire great love and great hate, and are in the end always broken upon the rack of this tough world. There is no place in England for Maddison, who believes that the Church has lost all the truth in its symbols through sheer stupidity, that the virgin birth of Christ must be attained by every soul, and most important of all, that one must follow nature always.

That is a hard saying. Again and again one lays down “The Pathway” to think. Yes, no doubt hatred between countries, no doubt all the little stings with which our desires are goaded in our modern cities, are artificial; if we were natural as hawks we should be free of all those. But beyond that, is being natural the way to attain the parthenogenesis of the soul, to be born again as little children? For Maddison, no doubt; but for the mean sensual man? For oneself? And again, *quid est veritas?* What is nature?

Maddison himself answers all these questions through his own inspiration or revelation. His heroes are the inspired poets and saints: Shelley, Blake, Saint Paul. It is strange to find Saint Paul, the theologian, with his insistent opposition of the natural and the spiritual man, in that company; but indeed it is strange to identify Maddison's Khristos with the Evangelists' Christ. Maddison is a law and a gospel unto himself.

Looking at the sky, he felt no remorse for having known love before; only regret. All the acts of men, that priesthood called sin, rose before him, but no human action could seem sordid under the blue space around the world. I regret nothing, he said to himself.

That is beautiful, but it cannot be drawn from any traditions of the Christ. Whatever Jesus was, He certainly taught that there were sins, and that they were regrettable.

These doubts trouble one only after he has shut the cover on the fascination of the book. The reading of it is as tonic as a plunge in the ocean: on emerging from it one feels that his own body is as cold and keen as sea-water. It is only on reflection that one comes to believe that Maddison's faith is too personal to be learned or taught. If any one shares that mystic revelation, that is the pathway for him: if not, there is no help in it for him.

Nevertheless, for its beauty and its piercing ideas, this is by all means a book to read.



## Literary Critics

THE WHIRLIGIG OF TASTE. By E. E. KELLETT. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1929. \$1.25.

THE GARMENT OF PRAISE. By ELEANOR CARROLL CHILTON AND HERBERT AGAR. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1929. \$5.

PHASES OF ENGLISH POETRY. By HERBERT READ. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1929. \$1.25.

LYRICAL POETRY OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. By H. J. C. GRIERSON. The same.

Reviewed by FRANK V. MORLEY

OF these four works of literary criticism, Mr. Kellett's is the most startling. He makes himself out to be a lively and erudite anarchist; and when such a mood comes over a writer of Mr. Kellett's standing, we have to pay attention. He begins guardedly, but once he is excited, he is ready to knock things down in all directions. If we analyze what happens, and express it in a different metaphor, the trick is seen to be both old and simple. He shuffles words like "taste," "criticism," "fashion," "beauty," "opinion," "fame," "goodness," until the spots are worn off; they become at length indistinguishable, and the whole pack, says Mr. Kellett, might just as well be torn up. When it comes to an end, he makes out he has had a good game, though now it is time to go home. He gets a safe conduct by stating that he, for one, is on the side of the many as opposed to the side of the few, and waves his hand as he goes out of the same door whence he came in. But at the end of such an entertainment, when one is left to ruminate amongst the wreckage, the trick may not seem such a good trick after all.

The variations of literary opinion (says the introductory note) are as numerous and as perplexing as those which Bossuet found among the Protestants, and arise from similar causes. There is the uncertainty about the standard of reference, and there is the difficulty of interpreting the standard when, if ever, it is found. Literary merit is a form of beauty, and—despite Burke—it is by no means demonstrated that absolute beauty exists: nor, if it does exist, is there any certainty in the application of the canon to particular cases. . . . In the present little work I . . . select, from the great mass of available material, a few specimens of the greater changes in literary taste which the world has seen. Only thus, in my opinion, is there any likelihood of finding something like a solid foundation amid the shifting sands of criticism.

Fair enough, and we know what we are in for; that there will emerge no rules that cannot be broken, no fashions that cannot be made fashionable at certain times, or that can remain fashionable at others. But that is not sufficient for Mr. Kellett, when he is excited. "There is nothing good or bad anywhere, and most certainly nothing in the sphere of esthetics, but thinking makes it so. . . ." Hm! It is not demonstrated that absolute beauty exists, says the introduction. Most certainly absolute beauty does not exist, says page ninety-six. Quite a difference is implied by these two statements. Even among rationalists Mr. Kellett may have trouble backing up the second. He proceeds by the familiar argument, that the beautiful is the habitual. The literary beauty of the Authorized Version of the Bible, for example, was not perceived at the time of its appearance. "It was read by all," says Mr. Kellett. "Such a work, at such a time, exercises an unparalleled influence." But "there is no sign" that anyone perceived the literary beauty. Mr. Kellett is tempted to believe "the very opposite"; which, if one thinks about it, is unintelligible. These are strong phrases for an investigator who professes "due caution and full recognition of liability to error." Having examined criticism among the Greeks and Romans, and, in England, among the Elizabethans, Classicists, Romantics, and Victorians, Mr. Kellett announces the result:

There are no permanent or established principles in criticism, is the one thing that emerges from such a survey; the one thing certain is that there is no certainty. . . . Goodness being a relative term, it is vain to call a thing good without saying what it is good for. . . . The wind of fame bloweth where it listeth. . . . The moral for the critic is obvious. He must deal less freely than is his wont in triumphant certainties and "absolute shalls."

In other words, there is no field of discourse, not merely about books, but about anything. What has brought Mr. Kellett to this conclusion seems to me to be wilfulness. He has not bothered to announce any regulations, and considers it fair to alter them at his own pleasure. A two is at one moment a two-

spot; at the next, all deuces are wild. In such a game, it is as well to watch your money. The critic who gets mine is the man who distinguishes between the realms of knowledge and opinion; who relates certain terms (say "truth" and "beauty") to the former, and others (say "fame" and "taste" and "fashion") to the latter. It is not difficult to argue that all opinion is opinion, and that it is a sickening sea. To argue that all knowledge is opinion is something else again, which does not usually survive much contemplation. The second argument is that a horse can be beautiful only because we are accustomed to horses; that there is no beauty in geometry except by convention; and that Wordsworth really should have written

Bliss seemed it in that dawn to be apparently alive  
But to be comparatively young seemed very heaven . . .

It is curious to see Mr. Kellett skipping from one argument to the other, with little of the caution which he recommends.

But if we feel that Mr. Kellett goes too far, we also feel that to claim slightly less would make an excellent case. A great deal of what passes for knowledge is merely opinion; habit often makes the heart grow fonder; and there is as much to say against dogmatism as there is for the desirability of essential dogma. The contrast between "The Whirligig of Taste" and "The Garment of Praise" is like that between a practised chess-player who happens to be in a bad position, and a weaker player who happens to be in a good one. There is no doubt about the fundamental rightness of "The Garment of Praise"; but there is doubt about the treatment. The subtitle of this large volume is "The Necessity for Poetry"; the contention is that this age lacks poets, and that we need them. Mr. Agar starts the ball, by dividing poetry into three types—that of sensuous appeal, of spiritual vision, and of prophecy. He wants all types, but most of all the poetry of vision and prophecy, for their own sakes and for the sake of "sermons against materialism." Machines are getting on my nerves, is what Mr. Agar says, in effect, in a later chapter. "As soon as this chaos stops proliferating, we can begin reducing it to order; but until that time we can do little except seek tranquillity in our own lives." Poetry can help; there is necessity for poetry.

The plea may be expressed in writings about and roundabout, or it may be expressed by going straightforwardly to examples. The word, and, as the jacket says, "impressive" way, is to go roundabout; the direct is the way described by Mr. Agar:

I once stood beside a landscape-painter on the slope of a hill in the White Mountains. We were looking down a valley which seemed to me beautiful, but subdued. My friend spoke of it as "all ablaze," and when I asked him what he meant he began pointing out the colors which my untrained eyes had either overlooked or else had blurred together into an unexciting neutral shade.

Such an awakening is most easily communicated by critical writing which goes to examples, not to theories. The painter pointed out the colors; he did not seize the moment to embark on the extremely difficult problem of the relations of art to its own age, and other ages. The hazardous, indirect way tempts Mr. Agar, and his remarks, when they are vague, are often dubious, and sometimes dull. In speaking of science, one is sorry to see that he misses one of the interesting revolutions of our time, whereby intelligent scientists, while admitting no compulsion from outside, say plainly that materialism is not enough for them. In speaking of Shakespeare and Spenser, Mr. Agar comes towards the texts, but even so, not close enough to be helpful. It does not help very much to be told in a general way that Shakespeare is convincing and that Spenser is a superb decorator. Mr. Agar has a warm feeling for Milton; but one wishes he would do what his friend did with the valley—one wishes he would risk all and point out color with precision.

In spite of that, one's sympathy with Mr. Agar is strong. One is less sympathetic to Miss Chilton. Mr. Kellett remarked that not infrequently "the foes of literature are they of her own household." The friend of literature must know how not to hinder, as well as how to help. To banish the headpiece is a bad way of training the emotions. Miss Chilton has contributed four chapters to "The Garment of Praise," and her first sentence boldly asserts what Mr. Agar is a little more cautious about—that "poetry is an expression of the religious mind." Her second paragraph is this:

There is very definitely such a thing as the poetic mind, and potentially—or at least, ideally—the poetic mind is nothing more esoteric than the human mind. We are all

poets in so far as we are aware of the complexity, the loveliness, and desolation inherent in the mystery of being alive. We are all poets whenever we are stirred deeply by the apprehension of a beauty we cannot describe; an apprehension which is so rich with impressions and confused thought and emotion that it is truly incommunicable. We are poets when we are sensitive to the mystery that sometimes divides and sometimes unites the seen and the unseen, and when we glimpse the Poetry of Earth that is never dead, and can never be contained on the shelves of a library.

The beginning of the quarrel is in the word "incommunicable." We are not all poets when we feel incommunicable stirrings; essentially the poet is a man who can communicate. If one is going to analyze the stirrings which affect poets, one may find that some are religious and some due to colic, that some are rich apprehensions and some are sudden angers; but where one finds the poet differing from other men, is in the use he makes of his feelings, the way he transfigures them. Miss Chilton does not give us a close analysis; and throughout her chapters the absence of precision and the dependence on vaguely allusive phrases, make her difficult to read. I believe that we gain little lasting satisfaction from loose phrases; it may be prejudice, but I feel the book's subtitle might have conveyed a better impression than "The Garment of Praise"; and that plain chapter headings might be in better keeping with the book's special plea, than such ornaments as Consecration of Valor, The Sea of Faith, Carpe Diem, A Loud Up-lifted Angel Trumpet, Sword of Lightning, A Darkling Plain, Winds of Nihilism, and Trivial Sands. Aside from the flossiness, the implied generalizations are apt to be misleading. Such chapter-headings are an assault on the emotions; but those who have religion at heart try to teach us to think. It was Traherne who said, "to think well is to serve God in the interior court."

And so one turns with a feeling of relief to Mr. Read's "Phases of English Poetry" and Professor Grierson's "Lyrical Poetry of the Nineteenth Century." These writers have convictions, and are not afraid to express them; but they are both concise and definite. Mr. Read covers the same ground as in "The Garment of Praise." His first lecture on "The Beginning of Poetry" is conventional; the two succeeding lectures, on "Poetry and Humanism" and "Poetry and Religion," are admirable examples of appreciative writing; and the concluding analysis of what is wrong with contemporary poets, though it seems ingenious rather than accurate, is interesting—for Mr. Read, as a not inconsiderable poet, speaks to the point, with special knowledge. Professor Grierson is admirable for such guidance as Mr. Agar referred to in his story of the painter in the mountains. A critic is to be known by his quotations; Professor Grierson goes straight to them, and knows exactly what he is about. This method is probably the only way to waken an interest in poetry; and to awaken an interest is to go a long way towards solving the contemporary problems which trouble the writers of the three books previously mentioned. Apart from problems, it is a joy to read Professor Grierson on, say, Walter Scott.

In a letter to the London *Observer* George Bernard Shaw says: "May I beg my worshipers not to scramble too blindly for alleged Shavianism? Otherwise they may share the fate of one of their number in America who just paid \$1,500 for a copy of Locke's 'Essay on Human Understanding.' It was advertised in a sale catalogue as profusely annotated and underlined by me."

"Before somebody else pays \$3,000 or \$30,000 for this treasure I had better state, unequivocally, that I never read Locke's essay and that I never disfigure books by underlining them. My practice, whether as reviewer or student, is to make a very light dot in the margin with a pencil-tip and note the page number on the end of a slip of paper."

"In short, this \$1,500 treasure is worth about 5 cents in the book market, though intrinsically it is worth as much as or more than a commentary by myself."

Mr. Shaw goes on to say that the "annotations" in Locke's essay were by his father-in-law, Horace Townsend of Derry County, Cork.

"I am sorry to disillusion its latest purchaser," he concludes, "and can only suggest, by way of consolation, that if the present rage for relics continues it may easily happen that when all my own autographs are appropriated my father-in-law's may command equally extravagant prices. Meanwhile, will dealers and collectors be reasonably critical and not repeat a mistake which only the prevalent mania can excuse?"