

William Jennings Bryan

THE PEERLESS LEADER: William Jennings Bryan. By PAXTON HIBBEN. Introduction by CHARLES A. BEARD. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1929. \$5.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MACDONALD

PAXTON HIBBEN lived to complete only twenty-one chapters of his life of Bryan. The subject offered him the possibility, not, perhaps, of a crowning achievement, for he was still in his prime when he died, but at least of a work which, more than any other he had written, should deal in a large way with a striking personality and an epoch-making period in American history. He spared neither labor nor expense in gathering his material, nor time and thought in endeavoring to evaluate it. If he had any prepossessions when he began, they had no weight against facts and reflection. The nine chapters which Mr. C. Hartley Grattan has added to complete the book carry on, as well as another hand could, the style and manner and detailed thoroughness of what Hibben had already accomplished; so well, indeed, that the average reader, if he did not stop to read the publishers' brief note of explanation and acknowledgment, would hardly notice where the one part left off and the other began.

The method of the book, as far as the use of authorities goes, resembles closely that which the late Senator Beveridge applied in his fragmentary life of Lincoln. We have a minute investigation of the details of Bryan's life, a careful following up of legends and stories, a rigorous testing of what others have written, and a frank disregard of accepted judgments not supported by indubitable facts. Looked at from the standpoint of the critic there should be, perhaps, no special praise for this beyond what is due to intelligent industry, since the least that is to be expected of a biographer is that he shall know what he is writing about. The main interest of such an accomplishment, however, for those who are not content merely with a verified record of details, is the picture of the man and his age which such a study enables a biographer to draw. At this point the book is a remarkable performance. The "peerless leader" retains his peerlessness, but only in the vivid contrast between the popular influence that he exercised and his intellectual shallowness, between his eloquent appeals for righteousness and his own indifference to certain moral considerations, between his cloak of public spirit and his eye for the main chance.

Bryan grew to manhood in an atmosphere which might well have overcome a stronger character than his. His boyhood was set in "a world of women," and a robust masculinity his mind never had. He looked forward to becoming a Baptist preacher until he witnessed a Baptist immersion; then a revival swept him into the Presbyterian fold and the "realm of fantasy" in which he thereafter lived. His father was a distinguished Democrat, and politics was as much a part of life as the daily bread, but what the young Bryan absorbed was the politics of an adolescent period that followed the Civil War, when the Democrats were groping for issues and a Granger revolt was seeking salvation through the destruction of the "money power." It would have been hard for any one to gather much strength from these surroundings, but Bryan was further handicapped by a genuine gift of oratory and a consuming ambition for prominence, office, and applause. His college life was, on the whole, a negligible episode, and the practice of law only a step on the political ladder which he set himself to climb.

It was by oratory that Bryan burst into public life, and by oratory quite as much as by anything else that he made his way. There is no gainsaying the beauty and richness of his voice at its best, his striking presence, his resounding rhetoric, his magnetic control of an audience, or his keen perception of the proper moment at which to bring himself forward. There is no parallel in our history to the influence which he wielded from the platform, and his sheer physical vitality amazed his friends and his enemies alike. We have never had such political campaigns as those in which he was the central or all but central figure. It is when we turn from the oratorical form to the substance of what was said, from the parade or tumult of the battle to the principles that were at stake, that the tinsel thin-

ness of Bryan's leadership becomes apparent. The biography now published is a masterly dissection of Bryan's intellectual quality and his vaunted skill and farsightedness as a popular leader. His attack on the Wilson tariff bill, in 1892, was pronounced by Champ Clark "the greatest and most brilliant speech he ever delivered," but it was a *post mortem* effort as far as free trade was concerned, for protection was in the saddle and destined to ride. Bryan was a subsidized spokesman for the silver interests when he championed the visionary doctrine of free coinage of silver as a specific for the people's ills; he was a paid lecturer at \$250 and expenses per speech when he helped the Anti-Saloon League foist prohibition upon the country; he was a defender of an antique theology and a last-ditch Christianity when he labored in the Scopes trial to destroy freedom of teaching in American colleges and schools.

At only one moment of his public career does Bryan now seem to merit lasting and grateful remembrance. That was when, as Secretary of State, he initiated the arbitration treaties that bear his name. Elsewhere, he either gave himself to what, politically speaking, paid, or else backed and filled.



MARCEL PROUST
From a drawing by Scheel.

His bitter fight with President Cleveland was clouded by his own obvious hope of succeeding to Cleveland's place. When, after his first and greatest campaign, he failed of the presidency, he appeared willing to disrupt the Democratic party or send it straight to defeat rather than abandon his hope of dictating a platform or the choice of a candidate, and he hung as a dead weight upon his party long after his tangible following had faded away. It was to his credit that he should have opposed the course of President Wilson in leading the country toward war with Germany when he himself was opposed to war and believed that it might be avoided; but his protest, like that of the intellectuals with whom he had no other link, went for nothing when, after the die was cast, he supported the war. It was always with him, the main chance that counted: the chance to hold office, the chance to win popular applause, the chance to be in the limelight, the chance to dictate what others should or should not do. One would like to believe that he was deceived, as were so many others, by the superficial appearances of soundness in populism and free silver, or that he was always at heart an enemy of privilege and a friend of the common man, but history does not accept such extenuations in the face of such a record as his biographers have here set down.

It should not at all be inferred, from what has been said of the Bryan picture, that the authors of this biography have undertaken to pillory Bryan either as a politician or as a man. They have quite clearly attempted nothing of the kind. Here and there, in the Hibben part of the book, are some keen thrusts and incisive characterizations to suggest that Hibben, as his material unfolded the story, felt too keenly the inconsistencies and ineptitudes of Bryan's career to withhold pungent comment. To this impulse, if it was really his, a vivacious and picturesque style, well adapted to the description of lively episodes, naturally lends its aid. The outstanding excellence of the book, however, is its straightforward and exhaustive presentation of the facts of Bryan's life. The book will give no joy to

those who still like to think of Bryan as a great man, and not much to those who affect to believe that the political movements which Bryan acclaimed or led represent some real advance in the direction of a sensible national life. But it is not the mission of biography to make any one out either small or great, or to single out and emphasize a hopeful tone. The only mission of biography is to tell the truth.

Negro Life and Lore

BLACK ROADWAYS. By MARTHA WARREN BECKWITH. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1929. \$3.

JOHN HENRY. By GUY B. JOHNSON. The same. \$2.

Reviewed by NEWBELL NILES PUCKETT

ETHNOGRAPHICAL zeal prevents Miss Beckwith from leaving her readers ignorant of how the Jamaican Negro plants his yams, traps birds, and shapes his baskets, but the folklorist enthusiasm before evidenced in her "Jamaica Anansi Stories" and other sketches of peasant Jamaica easily saves her from the path of dry and dusty trivialities. Not only is over half the book frankly devoted to that ever-absorbing potpourri of ghosts, obeah, graveyard etiquette, freakish religious sects, and folk art, but even the mundane routine of fishing, cutting trees, or building houses is richly spiced with signs, omens, and superstitions.

Close acquaintances of the rural American Negro (or the rural Englishman, for that matter) will recognize many old friends in this miscellany of folk custom. A gift of a knife or a pair of scissors "cuts" Jamaican love as readily as it does Mississippi love; a baby born with a caul has the power of seeing duppies; if an addition is made to the house after it is built some member of the family will die. The familiar witch who slipped out of her skin and returned to find it full of pepper roams on in Jamaica in the person of "Old Hige." Jamaican obeah, although more elaborate, parallels at least in general pattern the voodoo or hoodoo of America, and in both localities the frizzled chicken is highly valued because of its supposed ability to locate and scratch up devilment buried against a person by some enemy. Myalism with its close affinity for obeah smacks much more of West Africa than do any of the colored sects of America, but the "Revivalists," finding literal Biblical sanction for anointing with oil and sprinkling healing water, and the Pukkum-erians, specializing in spirit-raising and "unknown tongues," have at least partial American ritualistic counterparts. In our own rural South many Negro congregations are still enraptured by that heritage of shout-to-glory emotionalism from pioneer Methodist and Baptist days, but in general their Jamaican relatives seem to an extent dignified and sobered by the more orderly pattern set by the Anglican Church. The author exhibits no trace of distortion for the sake of sensationalism in this well-balanced and interesting analysis of Jamaican lore. An adequate bibliography, index, and numerous photographs add much to the value of the book.

In radical contrast to Miss Beckwith's portrayal of folk life through hundreds of beliefs and customs smoothly woven into a continuous strand is Dr. Johnson's study of the folk mind of the American Negro through a concentrated analysis of a single negro character, the much sung-of John Henry. From the King Arthur of knighthood days to the Steamboat Bill of the river folk or the Paul Bunyan of the lumber camps the ideals, yearnings, and ambitions of a group have found reflections in their folk heroes. With the Negro during slavery days hero lore seemed mostly animalized. In Brer Rabbit's many victories over more powerful animals the slave may perhaps have found an indirect outlet for yearnings which he dared not express openly. Where their hero worship included a powerful master or a slave of outstanding sagacity contacts and communication were so restricted that such reverence usually extended at most only to a few contiguous plantations.

Today, however, the Negroes sing freely of roustabouts and various bad men, including the supersexual Uncle Bud, but it is significant that "their greatest idol and hero is not an all-round desperado but a sober steel driver." The fame of John Henry is sung in every part of the negro United States, most often by wanderers and laborers "who could

tell three times as much about John Henry as they could about Booker T. Washington." Even in Jamaica, according to a version recorded by Miss Beckwith, his "ten pound hammer" has rung out to the doleful refrain of "Somebody dying every day."

The trail of this Ethiopian Thor who "died with his hammer in his hand" after beating the newly invented steam drill in open contest, has led Dr. Johnson into organizing John Henry contests in Negro schools and colleges; to John Henry advertisements in the Negro press; to personal investigation at the Big Bend Tunnel, the supposed scene of his demise; even to historical studies of the date of introduction and early efficiency of the steam drill. Of the material assembled some eleven work song versions and thirty or more ballad versions of John Henry, many of them with musical arrangements, are included in the present collection. Every available shred of evidence has been carefully dissected not only for data regarding the authenticity of the legend, but also to show the extent and method of its diffusion, the various alterations and additions, and its relation to other similar legends. Especially is new material brought to bear upon the identity of John Henry with John Hardy assumed by Professor Cox.

In spite of the tedious painstaking care and patience required in getting together and classifying this most complete of all John Henry collections, Dr. Johnson has worked in much of human interest and demonstrated clearly that he is "not one of those who believe that folklore studies must be dull in order to be scientific." If the author has not been wholly successful in demonstrating "what the John Henry Legend means to the Negro" it may be ascribed to general undevelopment in the social sciences rather than to lack of zeal on his own part. The expedient of citing such and such qualities as appealing "to something fundamental in the heart of the common man" reveals the universal lack of a definite measuring rod for checking off the vagaries of public opinion. Perhaps continued dissections of folk life will discover with exactitude just what there is about a particular culture pattern that forces members of that group into adopting one certain legend in preference to some other. Or may we in time expect that millennium when one may accurately predict in advance the popularity appeal of any new offering, be it fiction, song, or shaving-soap?

On Reading Biographies

(Continued from page 337)

and incidents; yet this imagination must be strictly controlled by the available facts, and these must be tirelessly assembled. The public library type of biography is usually a clever deduction from whatever the author can find in a hurry to fit the "new portrait" of Napoleon or Washington or Cleopatra that he has been hired to make.

A good biography cannot be impersonal and probably can never be unprejudiced. Men cold enough to write without bias are not warm enough to interpret their discoveries. Yet it must not be propaganda for sets of ideas (like many of the biographies of Jefferson, Hamilton, and Jackson in American history). In other words, a good biography must be intellectually honest. Macaulay's Whiggish biographies are honest, though certainly not unprejudiced. "Family lives" and campaign histories often lack integrity as well as impartiality. Smart books of scandal that set up as biographies are dishonest in another way; their authors would sacrifice Plato or Christ to make a sensation.

At least half of the biographies now being published violate one or more of these precepts. And more than half cover their nakedness as history by the garment of fluent writing. To the remainder all praise. They are sound without being dull, clever without falsification, novel without straining for effect, and, on the whole, the best reading we have had in the last few years. Good readers should help to protect them and the taste for biography, by insisting that when they buy a biography they get a biography, and not a bottle of acid, a warmed-over pie, or a cake of soap.

John Galsworthy has written a new play, which will shortly be produced in London. It is entitled "The Roof," and is described as a "modern comedy of character."

Plain, Unvarnished Truth

GOD HAVE MERCY ON US! By WILLIAM T. SCANLON. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LEONARD H. NASON
Author of "Sergeant Eadie"

THE writer of this review opened the above novel with mixed feelings. The jacket informed him that it was the novel that won a prize offered for the best war novel, or rather that it won the prize for "one of the best."* He was eager to read it to see what it was like. The jacket likewise informed him that the author was a marine. This would indicate that the book would be another testimonial to the effective help the United States Marines gave God in winning the late war. It's all right, however. The publishers wrote the jacket, but the author thank God, wrote the book.

I think we'd better drop the third person for a minute here, and the editorial "we" and so forth. I write war books myself, and it is a little difficult for me to judge a competitor's production with the impartiality that I would judge a sex novel. On the other hand, a reviewer is supposed to give his frank opinion of the book in question regardless of who wrote it or what field it covers, and the people who read that opinion must have confidence in the reviewer's good faith. I do not know Mr. Scanlon, but he has written a true book, and I believe, as marines go, that he is a likable young man. The book is not a novel, it is the war as Mr. Scanlon saw it, from the time he left Meaux in June, 1918 until the Armistice, when his division was before Sedan. It is a plain, unvarnished narration of events, with no attempt at plot.

After all, what plot does a man need who writes about war? I believe that this type of novel will continue to be written and sold and read for years to come, an indefinite number of years, until we have another war. Even after that, perhaps. How valuable would not a book be that was written as "God Have Mercy on Us" was written, by a legionary of Julius Caesar's, or by one of the Ten Thousand? Who knows what those men felt about the battle, what they had to eat, how they slept, if they plundered the dead, and what they found on them?

Mr. Scanlon's book compares favorably with that other great epic of the Marine Corps, "Fix Bayonets." But just as "Fix Bayonets" is obviously the work of an officer, with faint but unsuccessful attempts to reproduce the enlisted man's mental processes, so is "God Have Mercy on Us" obviously the work of an enlisted man with the same lack of success in understanding the officer. Mr. Scanlon is no writer. His story tells itself, so that he doesn't need to be, but there are places where one can see where patching has been done, and the mark of erasure and rewriting and sweating of blood is quite plain. There was a guiding hand somewhere there; I'll bet. And I'll bet the guiding hand chose the title. I don't like it. I never heard the words used, and my old outfit was in just as hot scraps as the Marines ever were, and a lot hotter too, which is the reason the said Marines hogged all the credit for them.

Some of this book is great stuff to read in bed at night if you want something to put you to sleep, but some of it is extremely pleasant. Mr. Scanlon puts two National Guard Divisions in their places by saying that they ran away, and telling when and where. I am glad he did this, for this is a new note. Our citizen soldiery was not supposed to have run away, but to have saved the world for democracy. I cannot testify to the truth of the two mentioned in "God Have Mercy on Us," but several that I saw seemed to be yearning for their home, wherever it was they came from, and going in that direction at a rate that would bring them there, or to the seacoast, at an early hour. The author also describes the visit of a popular actress who showed her drawers and had a spotlight turned on her to prove she had on almost nothing and then sent five or six thousand soldiers back to their barbed wire stockades to think it over. What would the folks at home have thought about that for their Christian soldiers?

So then, if you want to read about war, and see how the soldiers thought, and be bored at times as they were, and excited at other times as they were, read "God Have Mercy on Us." But you won't

* This chronicle by Mr. Scanlon, and the one by Miss Lee reviewed in the next column, divided the prize offered by the Houghton Mifflin Company and the American Legion Monthly for the best war novel.

get the thrill out of it you got out of "All Quiet on the Western Front," because "God Have Mercy on Us" is the truth.

More of the Truth*

IT'S A GREAT WAR. By MARY LEE. Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co. 1929.

Reviewed by FREDERIC J. KEPPEL

Director Foreign Operations, A. R. C., 1919-20

"IT'S A Great War" is an American woman's picture of the years from 1917 to 1920. The story is that of a New England girl just out of college who goes over as a clerk with a hospital unit which marks time at Bordeaux; she transfers to a job in an army office in Paris, no more satisfactory to her ardent spirit. Then comes incidental volunteer care of the wounded soldiers and a switch to a post as Y girl at a flying field near the front. She follows the soldiers to Germany with the army of occupation. Then comes the reluctant return to the United States and the attempt to fit in to a world determined to have normalcy.

Though cast in the form of fiction, Miss Lee's work is really a sermon; she wants the world to know what war does not only to men's bodies but to their souls. She has apparently been waiting for ten years for some one to tell the brutal truth as she has seen it regarding the officers of the A. E. F. (or some of them) and has finally done the job herself. It is not a pretty picture, this account of the love making propensities of a long series of American officers and gentlemen. Let us hope it is somewhat exaggerated and that Ann Wentworth's experiences were not wholly typical. No one at all familiar with the facts can deny, however, that between the training camp at home with its high powered idealism and the realities of the front line, many an officer who went to France cut a pretty sorry figure, and that he has been shielded since then by something like a conspiracy of silence.

As a story, the action goes forward as a series of brief episodes interspersed here and there with longer sections. The interest is well maintained, and the book is readable from cover to cover. Miss Lee has evidently a sharp ear, a clear eye, and perhaps most important in giving a sense of reality, a discerning nose. She has caught the idiom of the enlisted man as well as his profanity, and she makes one see town and camp and country side in France and Germany, and certainly she makes one smell them. It isn't the attempt of a woman to write like a man. Both in her choice of episodes and in her treatment of them, her book is wholly feminine; not of the Victorian order but of the clear-eyed young person of the new order, who can call a spade a spade even if she is a bit self-conscious about spelling out the letters.

Miss Lee follows the time-honored method of giving the feel of the alien tongue by putting the English words in the foreign order, touched up by an occasional phrase in French or German as the case may be. She does it pretty well, but the effect is marred by footnotes translating a few, and only a few, of the foreign phrases, and usually the less difficult ones.

The book may prove to be too long to get the attention it deserves. It might have been better to have the story finish when Ann Wentworth turns homeward. The later chapters deal, and deal intelligently, with the strife between the old generation and the new, made more vivid, of course, by the war experiences of the latter, but this has been done equally well by others, whereas her contribution to our records of the A. E. F. is unique.

However, Miss Lee has done her own job in her own way, and an honest and finely sustained piece of work it is.

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