

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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American Style

THERE is a lesson for American authors in autumn leaves, and in skyscrapers.

Literature has one quality not often remembered. It contains both the past and the future. In its form it is reminiscent, traditional, and built upon rhythms of life which may go back of the animate: in subject matter it is as prophetic as the human is capable of being, for it is, essentially, the imagination speculating upon the significance of experience.

Now, it is granted that American writers do not have to write about the United States, nor is it necessary that they should endeavor to be in any way characteristically American when they write. If one side of the literary coin bears often a national emblem, the other is stamped by the print of art which owes no final debt to nationality. Yet it is generally true that the writer draws his mental sustenance from things as they are about him, and there is a profit which, while it cannot be reckoned in certainties, is known to us all, in, not conforming, but corresponding to, and representing, the shape and substance of immediate environment.

It seems to many of us that the main achievements of American literature in the twentieth century have been heavier and more varied charges from the American scene. Our novelists, playwrights, and poets have sharpened their eyes, and made their pages the journals of the times. It will be far easier to reconstruct the appearance, temper, and the feel of American life, urban and rural, from the novels and short stories of the nineteen hundreds than from the literature of Irving's period, or even Mark Twain's. These moderns may be better journalists than scholars, and better imitators than creators, but no one can accuse their subject matter of not being American. They satisfy those curious as to the immediate future.

Not so with their style. Style by any definition, and certainly when regarded as the final form demanded by the nature of the work and the personality of the author, has been rare in our twentieth century writing. Asked for stylists, the names would come haltingly to the lips, and many of those mentioned in a lengthy list would be of writers certainly not eminent in the absolute. Robert Frost, Elinor Wylie, Thornton Wilder, Robert Nathan, Ernest Hemingway (in ambition certainly), Willa Cather (though not always), Christopher Morley (in his mood), Cabell, come to mind, but names do not rush after theirs. And yet the ready answer that style as such is not indigenous to America, does not belong here in true representation, is certainly untrue. This country had style in itself, and its citizens whenever they have pursued the arts in the past have rather noticeably sought it. Speaking of the very beginnings of the nineteenth century, Henry Adams notices this. Indeed, historically speaking, our list of stylists in literature is rather extraordinary for so brief a span in culture. As to the country itself, observers, especially literary observers, have been misled by the litter of the industrial revolution dropped, in a haste of development, more profusely here than on other continents. (The worst litter has been made by emigrants from countries supposed to have an established sense of beauty). No region in Europe has a more perfected style than the Brandywine valley, or the sumach tufted pastures of Connecticut. Maples in the American Fall, glowing against a rise of hemlocks, citron, gold, orange, crimson, scarlet, in nice gradation to a climax of light burning in the dusk, are lessons in style written upon every Appalachian hillside. The sonnet might learn

Lilac Blossoms

By PADRAIC COLUM

WE mark the playing-time of sun and rain,
Until the rain too heavily upon us
Leans, and the sun stamps down upon
our lustres,

And then our trees stand in their greennesses
No different from the privets in the hedges,
And we who made a pleasaunce at the doorstep,
And whether by the ash-heap or the spring-well
Growing, were ever fresh and ever radiant,
And fragrant more than grass is—

We, we are gone without a word that praised us—
You did not know how short the playing-time!

A Page of National History*

By WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

THE first decade and a half of the twentieth century saw the culmination of a long struggle. In those years covering the administrations of Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson's first term, the fight for the political control of America reached one of its major climaxes. On the one hand was the agrarian group; the farmers, the small town business men, and, more or less dubious and aloof, organized labor. On the other hand was the urban population; the national figures in finance, the industrial leaders: the large units of militant capital called the trusts, and also aloof and also dubious of its plutocratic allies, but more scornful still of the rural bourgeoisie, was the left wing fringe of industrial radicalism.

From the beginning, and for three hundred years, America had been dominated by its rural population, farmers and dwellers in country towns. During the early days of the Republic, Virginia planters had furnished its Presidents. Then following Jackson, came the backwoodsman of the frontier. Lincoln was of that breed and Grant and Garfield and the country preacher's son, Grover Cleveland. McKinley was small town lawyer. Latter day disciples of protection were protectionists because they hoped and believed that protection first of all would give the American farmer a home market for his products. Slavery became an issue when the small farmer found he was competing with the cheap farm labor in the South. Every major issue of American politics arose from the discontent of the farmer or from the farmer's vision of better times. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century one agrarian movement after another appeared and disappeared upon the national scene; the Grangers, the Greenbackers, the Farmers Alliance, the Populists, and Bryan Democracy. The procession was in truth one movement gathering power. When it captured the organization of the Democratic Party, the agrarian movement in American politics waxed husky and became almost respectable. It should have been opposed consistently by the Republican Party under Hanna's leadership. But suddenly the curtain dropped to rise on a new scene. McKinley was assassinated, Roosevelt appeared, Hanna died. And in the first three years of the new century, the agrarians began to capture the Republican Party. The Roosevelt policies put into polite Harvardian terms the barbaric yawp of Bryan and his predecessors. And Roosevelt in the White House dominated the Republican Party.

The Roosevelt policies became Republican doctrine somewhat ingrafted into the platform but bravely preached from the White House and from a score of State Houses where miniature Republican Roosevelts were translating into terms of state government all that Roosevelt stood for in the federal government.

So those days, from 1903 to 1917, were times of clamor and hubbub. The battle raged most fiercely during the four years between 1909 and 1913, when President Taft was in the White House. Before he came to power, Roosevelt, who was first of all an agitator and whose accomplishments in administration were only worthy, not extraordinary,

* WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT. By HERBERT S. DUFFY. New York: Minton, Balch & Company. 1930. \$5.
THE CHANGING YEARS. By NORMAN HAPGOOD. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1930. \$4.
TAFT AND ROOSEVELT: The Intimate Letters of ARCHIE BUTT. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1930. 2 vols. \$7.50.

This Week



"William Howard Taft," "The Changing Years," and "Taft and Roosevelt."

Reviewed by WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

"The Coming of the War."

Reviewed by CARLTON J. H. HAYES.

"Turkey Faces West."

Reviewed by NERMINE MOUVAFAC.

"Introduction to Wall Street," and "Why You Win or Lose."

Reviewed by PAUL WILLARD GARRETT.

"Crusaders of Chemistry."

Reviewed by BERNARD JAFFE.

John Mistletoe. XIV.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

"Mary Baker Eddy."

Reviewed by ERNEST S. BATES.

"Round about Parnassus."

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

Next Week, or Later

Whistler and His Day.

By JAMES LAVER.

from the fronded dogwood, and tragic harmony be instructed by the bronzed Autumn oak.

Our architects have felt no lack of style in their environment. Dealing with typical needs they have found a style for their upstretched steel and made the most dismal necessities express the hard beauty which an American city seeks. Our towers and cliff dwellings are more American in their content than the most native books. They house the people the novelists write about. But even though their forms began with conventions borrowed hastily from the past, they have found their own unmistakable mode. The American Telephone building has succeeded where Dreiser failed. It has a style.

Some writers should look at steel buildings, and others at pepperidge trees and highbush huckleberries in Fall, for both are American and both have style.

had been enlisting soldiers for the combat. After Taft left, Wilson in his first term, who was in certain phases Roosevelt's spiritual successor and political adversary, gathered up from 1913 to 1917 the fruits of whatever victory the agrarians could claim. But the war in Europe disorganized the phalanxes that Roosevelt and Bryan had gathered. A new alignment was made inevitable by America's entrance into the war. And in 1921 it looked to the casual observer on the battle site as if the old struggle had no significance, no result, and had ended in no victory. But be that as it may, from 1909 to 1913 the issue came to a definite clash in the first major political engagement in the history of the United States between the forces of industrial plutocracy and those who maintained the old rural traditions upon which the political faith of the fathers of the Republic was founded.

The three books before us deal with those four years. In the case of Major Butt's Letters, they deal almost entirely with those years. In the case of Mr. Duffy's biography, while the earlier life of President Taft has its place as background and the story of his later years furnishes the final chapters of the book, yet the main purpose of this Taft biography is to justify President Taft's course during those four furious Presidential years. Mr. Hapgood's narrative contains many charming pages telling of his youthful life in college, as a reporter, and as a dramatic critic, and later sets forth his contact with many men and many movements during and after the great war. But as a source book for historians who will tell the story of the Taft administration, many pages of the Hapgood reminiscences will be invaluable.

In these three books we have the background of the play staged by a perverse fate in the White House when the fury of the storm broke upon the dazed and unhappy figure of President Taft; the storm of popular wrath at what public sentiment genuinely believed was a betrayal of a public trust. We have here the characters for the play in the figures emerging from these three books; President Taft, who may be called the hero of the plot, Norman Hapgood, who might well be called public

action, plot and climactic, closed with an unhappy ending. President Taft, going into the White House with the confidence and acclaim of his country, left the White House a one-term President, who had gone before the people for their approval and who had carried only two out of the forty-eight states, two of the smaller states indeed, Utah and Vermont.

Mr. Duffy, the President's biographer, tells his story of the tragedy with many significant omissions. He makes Gifford Pinchot the villain of the piece and in his biography we see Pinchot, Roosevelt's conservation leader in the Interior Department, plotting to trick and trap and overthrow President Taft. In the Duffy story we see a good, brave, noble man—and in truth Taft was that exactly—standing calm amid slings and arrows before the intriguing progressive friends of Colonel Roosevelt. We read a story here of ruthless ambition, men surrounding Pinchot who are in league to break the beautiful friendship between President Taft and former President Roosevelt. We see President Taft valiantly defending Secretary of the Interior Ballinger who for some trivial reason has incurred the enmity of Pinchot and of a number of the progressives in the Interior Department. We see this plot of Pinchot and his villains enmeshing the great and noble President like the snakes of Laocoön, pulling him down to heroic defeat.

Next we read the prosecutor's story. Mr. Hapgood was editor of *Collier's Weekly* when *Collier's Weekly* was a militant progressive journal and when the progressives were called insurgents. *Collier's*, under Hapgood, was voicing public sentiment which in Congress overthrew Speaker Cannon. *Collier's* also directed its shafts at the White House and was one of the contributing agencies that brought President Taft to grief. Taft failed where he failed by virtue of his fault. Through the faults of his very virtues. It was inevitable that Taft should be pictured in the popular mind as the enemy of all that Roosevelt stood for. In the Hapgood story we hear the roar of public clamor beating upon the White House wave upon wave as one after another of the evidences of Taft's ineptitude at understanding pub-

lic sentiment and directing its curves, came washing across his career. Mr. Duffy's story is melodramatic because it omits almost entirely reference to this public sentiment which doubtless President Taft's friends called public clamor and felt was manufactured and hence more or less negligible. But the public wrath vitalized this melodramatic skeleton story which Duffy relates and gave it power, changing the melodrama to a tragedy.

In the Hapgood narrative we see why Pinchot rose with his protest. He felt, and he persuaded the American people, and probably with truth, that Ballinger, the Secretary of the Interior, was issuing orders which would overthrow the Roosevelt policies, so far as they affected the conservation of the natural resources in the west and in Alaska, putting valuable timber and mineral claims into the hands of exploiters. Hapgood's brief contends that Pinchot was not a self-seeking, or fanatical intriguer, but was defending the country against the encroachments of those whose plans and plots were most unpatriotic. Hapgood makes readers who did not live in those days, understand how the people roused themselves and by the sheer force of their extra constitutional powers stopped what they believed was the Ballinger raid, overthrew Ballinger, and politically defeated President Taft. We read in the Hapgood story how the President took a memorandum prepared in Secretary Ballinger's office and made it the President's own and issued it post-dated as a defense of his Secretary of the Interior. The stenographer who took the dictation which the President used and the young lawyer in the Department of the Interior who dictated the statement both appeared on the stand and swore to the truth and made the President's denial seem perfidious when it was merely careless and easy going. Indeed, as one reads the Hapgood account of the swift drama of those days, one is inclined to feel with the contemporary spectators that the President cut a sad figure in the midst of those alarms.

It is in the story that Archie Butt tells that we find a nearer approach to the truth. Here for the first time we are behind the scenes in the White

comedy; another, looking up, sees crass melodrama, villain and hero, amid the meaningless accidents of circumstance. But in Archie Butt's letters, covering the period from the inauguration of Taft in 1909 until the spring of 1912, we get a most human picture of a man out of his element, fighting awkwardly against he knows not what phantoms, battling bravely but foolishly against he knows not what fate. In the Butt Letters we see President Taft as he was. Senator Dolliver cruelly described him as "a large body surrounded by men who knew exactly what they wanted." Former President Roosevelt said: "Taft means well but he means well feebly." Both statements had a certain basis in fact but neither was justly true. From the Dolliver pronouncement we get the impression that Taft did not struggle to rid himself of the malevolent influences around him. From the Roosevelt jibe we might infer that Taft was a coward, that he surrendered complacently to the demands of marplots. From Major Butt's Letters we learn what a man he was, but how ill-fitted for the task before him. From out of the Butt book he emerges a truly tragic figure, a man who earnestly desired to do the right thing and who saw, even if through a glass darkly, where the right lay, but was bound by inner forces, a Prometheus to the rock of his own shortcomings, and could not rise and do battle effectively for the cause which was unquestionably near his heart.

In the public mind of that day, Senator Aldrich of Rhode Island and Speaker Cannon of the House of Representatives figured as the President's evil geniuses. A large section of the American people saw in Cannon and Aldrich, two devils of conservatism chaining the man in the White House to their chariot and leading him their way. The Butt Letters make it plain that Taft distrusted both Cannon and Aldrich and disagreed with them deeply about public policies which he could not achieve. The Butt Letters also disclose the fact that President Taft as an administrator had no proper sense of the weakness and the strength of men, and established no methodical habits of industry. From these letters we know that the trouble with Taft as Chief Executive was that he was not vocal at a time when the people demanded not merely action but words; in-

deed when words were deeds and leadership required the dramatization of his cause through various speaking trumpets which always lie ready for a President's use. Behind the scenes with Major Butt in those times of stress President Taft is always saying: "But I can't be a Roosevelt. I must do these things in my own way."

The time demanded a Roosevelt, demanded dramatic leadership, and could not understand Taft nor follow one who could not explain himself as he went. Taft's administration was unpopular, not because it followed Roosevelt's, but because Taft cared nothing for popularity and thought his self-sufficiency a virtue. But alas, without popular support a President is powerless for righteousness before the mammon of unrighteousness. And what the people took for a complacent acceptance of the mammon of unrighteousness in the White House in Taft's day was really Taft's repugnance to popularity, his stubborn determination not to take the people into his confidence and explain his day's work as he did it. He felt it was enough to do a day's work. But unfortunately for one who would lead a Republic, the mere doing, unless accompanied by some sort of dramatization of the deeds, avails little. Leadership vanishes, power for righteousness disappears, and one is left not merely naked to one's enemies, but seemingly shameless and happy as he stands naked in their midst.

So it was with President Taft. His loyalty to President Roosevelt when he entered the White House was unqualified. His belief in the things which Roosevelt stood for, the Roosevelt policies, was sincere. His attempt to carry them forward was not a feeble gesture. He tried hard but he could not carry out the Roosevelt policies without the Roosevelt methods. For the methods and the policies were inextricably united.

Major Butt makes it clear how deaf President Taft was to public sentiment, how ineffective he was when he tried to talk with the American people. About all he could do during those four miserable years was to come out on the front porch of the White House and dumbly make faces at a hundred million people. At last they thought he was : he was a vic- it was all too Butt reveal the

tragedy backstage so clearly that no enemy of President Taft's could read this story and withhold admiring pity for a man so miscast to play the role which fate assigned to him.

Of course, these three books focus on those years from 1909 to 1912. The light on those years comes from three diverse angles, through three separate lives. And before glowing at the focal point and after, two of the lives, those of Norman Hapgood and President Taft, went on other journeys, on other errands. Major Butt died before the campaign of 1912 was well begun, before Roosevelt broke publicly with Taft.

The biography of President Taft begins, as it should, with his ancestry, childhood, youth, and unfolds with his achievements in the Philippines and in the Roosevelt cabinet. And it ends in the Supreme Court. And Mr. Duffy, outside of the controversial matters, has made a fairly clear, reasonable picture of an amiable statesman. Posterity will see from Mr. Duffy's picture an understandable man. As a biographer, Mr. Duffy has left something to be desired in the way of shades in his portrait. His subject is a little too waxy, not quite human enough. His foibles have been slighted; his weaknesses ignored rather than justified and explained and made a part of his strength, as they certainly were.

Norman Hapgood tells his own story also from the beginning. And upon the whole his story is much more interesting in the earlier and later parts than it is in those days of stress and storm. Norman Hapgood's story of Harvard makes a beautiful picture, and his account of the adventure in peace with Wilson is a charming, illuminating narrative. Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, three presidents whose careers covered nearly two decades, touched Mr. Hapgood's life rather intimately. Roosevelt, he supported; Taft, he opposed; Wilson held him in high esteem, and Mr. Hapgood was as intimate with Wilson as any man dared be and live. His reports on Roosevelt and Wilson will be source stories for historians. They will know what manner of men these two great presidents were.

Also, Major Butt records affairs and goings-on in these letters of the Taft administration that have nothing to do with politics. There is a beautiful