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March Selection of the Book League of America

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Points of View

Anonymous Reviewing

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

Your interesting leader, *Reluctant Reviewers*, invites American reviewers to speak out more frankly, but at the same time enumerates some of the considerations which will prevent the timid, peace-loving intellectual from responding to your invitation. Have you not overlooked the chief obstacle to truth-telling in reviews? The editor may welcome a discriminating frankness, the public or the clique of his more ardent admirers will not tolerate anything but unqualified laudation of any writer who has won their favor. A communication in your own columns wittily ridiculed me for having ventured to mention in a review one or two mistranslations in the book of a popular favorite. Another entirely courteous but frank, true, and specific criticism published in another New York weekly was met by a flood of extravagantly laudatory reviews of the same book and condemned in conversation as true but improper. From another review in which I deprecated what seems to a classicist a modern misuse of the word humanism, a lady actually inferred that I would be unwilling to meet socially any of my very good and greatly respected friends, the so-called humanists.

No reviewer who values his peace of mind and who is not resigned to be overwhelmed with abuse instead of reasons will dare to criticize frankly not the persons but even the published writings of Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. Bernard Shaw, Professor Gilbert Murray, Miss Jane Addams, and Mr. George Santayana, to mention at random a few of the most brilliant illustrations of my thesis. Mr. Santayana will serve as a test case both of your tolerance and that of the lesser but very articulate public of his followers. He is a genuine poet. His prose style is in its way beautiful. But the effect is achieved by the temperate use of pretty but question-begging imagery and by an evasive use of dainty abstractions so equivocal that his admirers cannot define his meaning and a critic cannot hold him responsible for his interpretations of the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history. The tenuity and ambiguity of his thought will surprise any reader who will resolutely undertake to express in plain, unequivocal language the meaning, for instance, of the article on *The Appeal to the Supernatural*. It means, to put it bluntly, that he wishes to eat the cake of idealism and have it too.

There is one other meaning on which even my frankness can only touch lightly. Mr. Santayana was obviously displeased by American life and does not like America. The in its unwarranted extension quite meaningless *cliché*, "the genteel tradition," is itself evidence of that. So is the attribution to those with whom he disagrees of the phrase "that loose, low creature, Walt Whitman."

All reviewers commend the urbanity of Mr. Santayana's style. Do you really think that sneering irony, however delicately expressed, is more urbane than the frank intellectual trenchancy that raises specific issues and presents a definite challenge?

PAUL SHOREY.

Chicago, Ill.

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

Anonymous criticisms? Spare us that, Mr. Editor, please! Even if it means that a few bad books do go unwhipped! We are not so dumb that we can't spot the rotten apples to the extent of letting 'em alone. There's nothing to be gained by shying them up against the barn door.

How do you expect us to use any discrimination of our own (provided we have any, of course) when we don't know any more than anonymity tells us? And it makes a difference (to me at any rate) whether the standards applied to a book were the standards, say, of Sinclair Lewis, or those of Henry Van Dyke. Or of Earnest Elmo Calkins and Stuart Chase.

I am not "clamoring for names and distinctions," but for information, sources, citations, qualifications of witnesses. A "greater frankness of individual opinion" is perhaps desirable, but to my misguided mind at least, opinion under the cloak of anonymity simply ceases to be individual. If it may be "anybody" it might almost as well be nobody.

I may be quite wrong about it, but it seems to me that the *Review* has attained to its enviable position of dignity very largely because it has demonstrated the ability to choose authorities wisely, and to en-

list their interest and coöperation. Perhaps it could have done the same if its contributors had remained anonymous; but I seriously doubt it. I doubt very much if it can maintain its position by a reversal of policy. At least I know one reader to whom its usefulness would be very greatly impaired.

ROY W. JOHNSON.

New Rochelle, N. Y.

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

For my own part, I should dislike very much to have the reviewer's name withheld. If editors were to keep alive the ideal described in the *Saturday Review* editorial of January 10, there would be greater demand for dependable reviews. An occasional editor's dissenting footnote would help, too.

OSCAR L. SIMPSON.

Nashville, Tenn.

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

Apropos of "Reluctant Reviewers," did you ever hear that "the American Historical Association was founded to enable the writers of histories to meet and become acquainted with (and perhaps drink a glass of beer with) the reviewers of histories"? There is a widespread opinion in the Guild that reviews appearing in the *American Historical Review* are too amiable, and that reviews of French and German and English works are more searching than reviews of American books. This for what it is worth. A HISTORIAN.

We quote the following from the *Princeton University Press Almanac* for February:

The Saturday Review of Literature in its issue of January 10 complains that "when there is need for frank and honest speaking" on the part of book reviewers, "something restrains them." *The Saturday Review* asks whether anonymity would help this "vice" of book reviewing, and whether that fraction of the American public which reads book reviews would be willing to accept the authority of the journal publishing a review, instead of clamoring for the name and distinctions of the reviewer.

This question is particularly interesting to us, not only because the *Almanac* made a plea for anonymous book reviews some years ago, but because, in answer to our plea, the editor of *The Saturday Review* wrote in to say we were "all wet."

There are dangers of anonymity, of course, but it is to be presumed that reputable Reviews would engage the services of reputable reviewers, and after all an editor has rights which can be exercised whenever he suspects anything is wrong. Further, an editor must, in the last analysis, accept responsibility for the material in his columns, whether it is signed or appears anonymously.

Signed reviews, it seems to us, give the reviewer too great an opportunity to air his own personal opinions. Most books are reviewed by some man interested in the particular field the book covers. That is all right. The trouble is few people are ever entirely agreed about books, and a known reviewer is likely to argue his own position, and in the process neglect the volume he is supposed to be reviewing. If he is reticent, we suspect his reticency may sometimes be due to fear that he is not on particularly safe ground.

Personally, we should much prefer the opinion of *The Saturday Review of Literature* to that of Roscoe Whosis writing in the columns of that excellent periodical. We believe it would carry more weight, just as an unsigned editorial in *The New York Times* carries more weight than a signed expression of opinion from some individual in a neighboring column. We should take it for granted that a good Review would have only good reviewers on its staff. An anonymous book review, sponsored by a reputable Review, would be a responsible review, it seems to us. In our opinion there are too many Pollyannas and Smart Ales writing book reviews nowadays. Practically all of them are straining a bit too hard to appear clever and erudite, and frequently at some other person's expense, the easiest and cheapest method yet devised. We should like to see publishers quoting *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The New York Times*, *Books*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* in their advertising, rather than,—well, everyone knows their names. Book reviewing, in our humble opinion, is a dignified, honorable, and exceedingly important profession. Sometimes we wonder if, as it is now constituted, it is not in danger of becoming a racket.

The New Books

The books listed by title only in the classified list below are noted here as received. Many of them will be reviewed later.

Belles Lettres

EGIL'S SAGA done into English out of the Icelandic, with an introduction, notes, and an essay of some principles of translation. By E. R. EDDISON. Cambridge University Press (Macmillan). 1930.

Egla is one of the great sagas; only Njala is markedly better, and that only in spots. We have long had the latter in English dress, and now Mr. Eddison gives us the Egil's saga in a translation which we, for one, find altogether delightful. He has filled a great gap, and we owe him much. Not that everybody will like his methods. Mr. H. C. Wyld has recently condemned in the most vigorous terms the diction of the Morris school of translators, who, he says, produce "an effect at once strange and ludicrous, a version from which the poetry of the original has vanished, and whose meaning is often quite unintelligible to a reader not possessing a good knowledge of Old English poetry." This criticism, directed at modern English versions of Beowulf, applies just as well (or ill) to translations from Old Icelandic, and Wyld would hardly approve of Mr. Eddison's version of Egla, for Mr. Eddison is most emphatically of the school of Morris. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and however strongly one may condemn, in theory, the use of archaisms and the like, it would be hard to put theory to practice in Mr. Eddison's case: he has done too good a job! Besides, it is one thing to object to excessive use of archaisms and quite another to admit no archaic diction at all. Dogmatism and absolutism in such matters can only be deplored, and many of us will be grateful to Mr. Eddison for his "terminal essay," in which he defends with vigor and point the method which he has made his own. His translation is indeed close to the original, both in letter and in spirit, and of a translation what could be higher praise?

History

THE FIGHTING KINGS OF WESSEX. By G. P. BAKER. Dodd, Mead. 1931. \$4.

Mr. Baker depends chiefly upon secondary sources, but his annotations show careful study, and this book, like his earlier "Hannibal," demonstrates his ability to write with scope and penetration as well as with power of interesting his reader. This book, although ostensibly a history of the English kings from Alfred to Harold, begins with a most valuable study of the obscure history of Britain from the end of the Roman period to Alfred, which indicates more lucidly than any available book for the general reader the place and importance of early English history in the general break-up of the western Roman Empire. The book is particularly interesting in its study of British and Anglo-Saxon relationship where recent investigations as to the wide survival of British stock have been most intelligently used. Mr. Baker is also particularly successful in indicating the general character of the conflicting cultures: Roman, Celtic, Saxon, Danish, and Norman. In spite of the grumbling of research historians bred in late 19th century tradition, one of the most valuable features of recent historical publication is the appearance of books like this one which summarize for the general reader the significance of painfully acquired detail which in special studies does not reveal its importance. It is quite probable that many of Mr. Baker's theories are disputable, but on the whole this seems to be a sound as well as a very illuminating work and of much broader interest than its title would indicate.

Juvenile

TURN AGAIN TALES. By LAURENCE HOUSMAN. Henry Holt. 1930. \$2.50.

With whimsical ingenuity, a clever mind here juggles with fairy tale themes against a background of laboratory science and psychiatry. "What the Professor wanted to do was to discover the fairy's density, solubility, specific gravity, atomic structure, reaction to changes of temperature, chemical and atmospheric environment, and the various dynamic forces of which electricity in its various forms is one"; "... a frightful explosion took place with a thoroughness which in its results suggested far less a blind mechanical agency, expending itself with centrifugal force on its surroundings, than a consciously malevolent will beautifully avenging itself. . . ." Could theme or language be farther removed from the comprehension or enjoyment of the child of fairy tale age? This is the humorous imagination of the sophisticated, the amused

use of modernity by the adult, playing at being young again.

Some of the stories, however, have natural humor, tenderness, and grace. When Mr. Housman ceases to be clever and is content to take the old path to the heart of the unchanging child, he is easy, graceful, sincere. The children will quickly discover the good stories.

The illustrations are unusually true to the text and are delightful to the eye. The volume, like most modern books for children, is too large and too heavy for the child to handle easily.

SKYCRRAFT. By AUGUSTUS POST. Oxford. 1930. \$3.50.

The boy who is itching to get his fingers on the controls will find in "Skycraft" a readable and thorough primer. It is a book of general information on aircraft and the art of flying; an ensemble of material that is accurate, beautifully simple, and comprehensive. There is a touch of history, the rudiments of aerodynamics, brief descriptions of the parts and types of lighter- and heavier-than-aircrafts, something about motors and instruments. The chapter on "How to Fly" is a good description of the student pilot's first hours in the air, when he can know so little that all he needs to know can be included in a few pages. The merit of the book lies in its omission of complications that would bore, puzzle, or petrify the young beginner. On the subject of parachute jumping, the author, who has evidently done considerable himself, is nonchalant and claims that there is nothing to it at all. He pulls the cord on the count of five instead of the traditional ten, although he once dropped twelve hundred feet before opening his chute, just for the fun of it, one is left to infer. The diagrams are considerable, are to the point, comprehensible, and not obscured behind a spider web of dotted lines. You don't need a microscope to read the labels and not every known fact in aviation is crammed into one page.

(Continued on next page)



The Best Seller of 1931

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The "Brownstone Era"
The Puritan Shadow
The Glass of Fashion
The "Gay Nineties"
The Puritan and Prosperity
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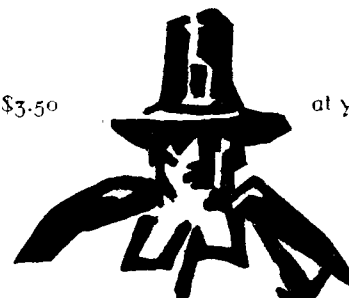
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