

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME VIII

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1931

NUMBER 17



MEDIEVAL SCHOLARS. FROM "THE WORLD WE LIVE IN" (MACMILLAN).

### Those Who Know

SOME commodities lag painfully in the general deflation. Stocks came first; it seems that synthetic books will be the last to pop into nothingness.

We have had fat and jubilant years for the ready writer, but they are passed. No longer ago than 1930, the skilful penman had only to open his "Century Book of Names" and check off the notables of whom no post-Stracheyan biography had been written, then rush to his publisher for a contract. Not knowledge, except stale knowledge, not insight except a point of view borrowed from Freud or Jung, not research but reading, not erudition but composition, were required for the job. And there they stand—most of them on the remainder shelves—the thousand new biographies, of which perhaps twenty-five are valuable re-creations of great figures, newly interpreted, perhaps two hundred fresh biographies, poor to good, of new figures (mostly American), hitherto unstudied, and the rest rewrites, some of them edible hash, many of them mere tripe.

It is time and high time for reviewers and readers alike to search the lists for authors who know. We have often in this column maintained the duty of wise men to write at least as well as fools, and condemned the slovenly habits of scholars and scientists who will not learn to tell what we need to know in form and style acceptable and intelligible to a civilized intellect. With the exception of first-rate discoveries of new fact, there is nothing more important at a moment when public opinion is mass opinion than the successful popularizing of what those who know, know to be true. But in the period of inflation this popularized knowledge has been blown to a soap-bubble thinness. The concern has been for easy reading at all costs. The solid and well-written volumes of the late nineteenth century have proliferated with extraordinary fertility as the result of an incestuous union with their own offspring, the plain and humble little handbooks for the multitude we used to know so well. And the product

has been a gorgeous but insubstantial creature, got up like a travel book or an illustrated history, written to sell with only what would sell between its covers.

In fiction, also, we have had too little concern for those who know. We have listened avidly to reporters of current life (clever ones too we have had), but the close questioning of their knowledge of society in its largest sense and of human nature in its eternal aspects, which the novelists had to meet when they were regarded as probably frivolous and presumably immoral, has mostly ceased. In the inflated era life seemed to move so fast that the reader no more asked style, form, and philosophy of his novel than of his newspaper. He wanted news.

The great increase in novels that purported to be realistic and non-fiction books in general in the second and third decades was an occasion for praise and congratulation. We do not regret it. But what also happened was a change more subtle and less excellent than we realized. A new cleavage appeared in the reading world. There had been fluffy books for the frivolous reader, and substantial books for the substantial reader. But when books with substance in them began to attract the frivolous, the temptation to capitalize this new interest was too strong to be resisted. The clever pens were quickly recruited to make all knowledge easy, the best-seller lists were soon assaulted by works on portentous themes, and visibly as the market increased for erudition, erudition itself grew less erudite, more second-hand, and less authoritative. And, since the rewards of success were tempting, soon only dull writers and patient readers were left for uncompromising books of sound fact and reasoned opinion.

The cure is not in rhetoric nor criticism (although critics can help), nor yet in research and scholarship. It is in the power of the reader, who can insist, if he wills it, that skill in writing and real knowledge shall once again run together, so that he shall be served only by those who really know at first-hand and by deep scrutiny before they write.

### How to Educate Children

By NAOMI MITCHISON

I SUPPOSE I was a bad little girl. I liked school and I loved winning prizes—which I usually managed to do! And also I loved reading fairy tales and story books and poetry. But if I began to suspect that the book I was reading was meant to improve me or to teach me anything, I immediately looked at it with the most fierce suspicion and often refused to go on with it. School was one thing, reading books for my own enjoyment was another. I wasn't going to let them mix!

However, the odd thing was, I didn't so much mind improving books so long as they were grown-up ones. Often, of course, they had special attractions like the pictures of people being eaten by lions in Fox's "Book of Martyrs," or the strange anthropology in the long, old-fashioned travel books that my grandfather had in his library! But if I met those same travel books abbreviated and cleaned up and in general made suitable for the young, some natural perversity and rebelliousness stepped in, and at once I found them boring and stupid.

Yet I don't believe I was really at all unlike other children over this particular perverseness, this dislike of being kindly improved and educated, which may vary in practice from mild uneasiness to positive violence and the destruction of well-meant Christmas presents! I believe it has a real and solid basis in esthetics. The child who objects to having a good story mixed up with instruction is showing better artistic taste than the adult who wrote the book.

For, surely, all art is spoiled by deliberate propaganda. Surely the two things cannot exist side by side in the same piece of work. Art may be propaganda incidentally. We cannot look on the Parthenon frieze without feeling the greatness of citizenship, nor on Breughel's "Massacre of the Innocents" without a passion of indignation against the needless cruelty of man. No doubt, while they were at work, citizenship of Athens was in the mind of Phidias, and indignation against the cruelties of the Spaniards was in the mind of Breughel; but they made their works of art simply, directly, as sculpture or as painting, without trying to induce the spectator to have any non-esthetic judgment about them. The same thing applies to stories for children, in so far as they are art. And more and more, we and our children are insisting on it that they should be art! They must be regarded esthetically. If there is to be anything educational about them, that must be an integral part of them. But if the propaganda stands out and breaks the artistic unity, the whole thing stands condemned.

In the old-fashioned children's stories which had moral rather than educational purposes, the moral was all part of it, and so, acceptable. It would be impossible to make a bowdlerised version of that really very unkind and dreadful story, "Rosa-mund and the Purple Jar," because the moral is inextricably interwoven with the plot; Thomas Hardy could scarcely have thickened the atmosphere of doom! As a child I enjoyed it thoroughly, and modern children enjoy it too, partly, no doubt, because it is impossible to take the moral seriously, but partly because it has a

magnificent kind of sham unity. But nowadays morals—and especially moral chastisements—are quite out of fashion. The demand is all for education and more education, stories dealing with history, engineering, exploration, fine needlework, astronomy or bookkeeping by double entry. There is so much to be squashed in somehow or another in the three score years and ten!

But how are we to get it all in? Well, my theory is that if one must have education out of hours and mixed up with pleasure reading, it should be put quite separately, as shortly and compactly as possible, in the shape of prefaces or notes. Nobody, after all, has got to read notes. They are separate; they don't spoil the flow of the story, the unity. And the odd thing is, that if some bit of the book is kept separate and rather dry and unattractive, one is very, very likely to read it—out of the same spirit of perversity in another incarnation, I suppose. How I enjoyed the notes in Scott! How well I remember them now, when most of the novels themselves have gone hopelessly out of my head! How exciting the notes and references are in Jacob's excellent volumes of fairy tales, and how they enhanced the tales themselves, although one kept them entirely separate in one's imagination.

American children's books are, on the whole, much better than English ones, yet it seems to me that the very best of the English ones are best of all, because the element of didacticism is not in them. No educationalist could make anything out of Richard Hughes's latest story-book, nor from Madariaga's completely fascinating "Sir Bob"; they are the real stuff of the dreams we used to have before Freud was a household word! I have noticed once or twice, when my own children have been reading American stories, that their delight at the admirable competence of

### This Week

HOW NOT TO EDUCATE CHILDREN.

By HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON.

THE DRAGON AND THE MILLER.

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

"THE THREE OWLS."

Reviewed by BERTHA MAHONY.

"THE HOLE IN THE WALL."

Reviewed by ANNE CARROLL MOORE.

PICTURE BOOKS.

Reviewed by RACHEL FIELD.

"GUN NOTCHES."

Reviewed by STRUTHERS BURT.

"VANYA OF THE STREETS."

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL.

THE BOWLING GREEN.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

### Next Week, or Later

"CROWDED YEARS," by WILLIAM GIBBS McADOO.

Reviewed by HON. JOSEPHUS DANIELS.



the books, the excellent production, and completely satisfying pictures, was mixed with a certain uneasiness. They could not explain quite what it was, but I am almost sure myself that it was the improving element, so skilfully put in as to be hardly perceptible, which was obscurely bothering them.

Again, of course, the very best American books are not intentionally improving, though they may be extremely educational to English children. Long Island has ceased to be a mere name for my boys since reading Christopher Morley's "I Know a Secret," though they may have got odd ideas about the behavior of New York squirrels towards Christmas time! Carl Sandburg's stories, too, are full of strange and fascinating western words which may stick in the head when a geography lesson is forgotten. And the same must often be true for English books in America. But this is not intentional education, so nobody resents it.

I do feel very strongly that real education has its own *arete*, its own peculiar goodness, which is not at all the same as the goodness of art, and which should not be mixed up with it. Education should be hard and tough and separate, with the attraction not of soft caramels in an open box—as some people seem to envisage it!—but of green apples in a stranger's orchard. Children like solid things to bite on, nuts and hard apples and bones and facts. They can tackle facts in the same way that the ostrich tackles stones, bright, hard, wonder-making facts. They can pick them up and tuck them away almost indefinitely between the ages of five and fourteen, and the mental digestion never seems to suffer. After that for most children facts begin to lose some of their attraction; there comes instead a longing for theory and system and a fitting-in of the great accumulation. But before that, nothing in the way of facts comes amiss, so long as they are plain, straight-forward facts, difficult perhaps, but not served up with a sauce of fiction or, on the other hand, too many steps beyond the point in knowledge at which the child has just arrived. As soon as a child can read and write quite easily, the passion for lists first seems to start, the same passion which is apt to go on all one's life and entangle one at the most advanced age with bulb catalogues. Collecting is, I suppose, only a more concrete form of lists. One may collect stamps or butterflies, but undoubtedly the most amusing and varied things to collect are facts. Most children find that out for themselves, though, if they are spoon-fed with facts made pleasant and easy and sugared over with fiction, they may perhaps never find it out at all. For the fun is to dig up and collect one's own facts—later on, one's own theories—from life and from books. One cannot collect facts indefinitely from life, especially if one is a town child leading a sheltered existence, but books are an inexhaustible mine. Besides facts, one must, of course, have fantasy, but let them be separate, each exercising a different part of the mind, each with its own *arete*.

So to my mind the best reading for a child of over eight, say—for before that this collecting of facts from books has hardly begun—is a mixture of the purest fiction and fantasy, including poetry—and when I say poetry I mean poetry, not poetry for children!—with plenty of solid and dull-looking stuff from which the nuggets of fact can be mined. There must, certainly, be plenty of books available, varied books on all sorts of subjects, for the collecting mind will sometimes be hunting for one set of things, sometimes for another. The kind of thing which appears to be indefinitely attractive to most children is some technical book on engines, say, written not for the young but for a non-expert mechanic. Catalogues, again, seem to be a sure draw, those engineering or wireless catalogues, which always fill me with dismay and bewilderment, but which seem to provide meat and drink for my own children! Something in the boys' minds seems to be lighted up and set going; these component parts of machines are not meaningless; the facts fall together and start working. And, lo and behold, the

fairy of applied mathematics has descended!

I think this business of facts applies to all the sciences and most of the arts. Over the learning of history it applies in a way still more forcibly. For history can be more easily distorted and sugared over than chemistry. School history is very largely distorted, and though the distortion is usually not so marked for the adult, yet it is there still. In particular, our views of world history and of classical history are deliberately falsified by most school and out-of-school books. There are museums—among them some of the greatest—which have collections of Greek vases, but only put out on show those which are strictly decent, a proceeding which would be perfectly reasonable in a private house but which is indefensible in an educational establishment. History books do the same thing. They leave out not only essential facts, but also states of mind of the past, and those written for the young are worst of all. It is these children's books—and many of us never read any history after we are grown up—which make us think of the past as inhabited by persons who were either noble-minded and very boring, or wicked and quite unconvincing: people, anyhow, without bodies. Book people. Paper people. In those school, or out-of-school, books the Greeks pace nobly in a kind of white night-gown through colonnades of the purest plaster, discoursing, oh so dully, of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. No wonder that most grown men and women think more or less in secret what Henry Ford has had the courage to shout from the rooftops: History is Bunk.

That's not necessary. Fill out those people with facts. On facts, clearly seen and clearly put, they will come alive. To history above all we owe the truth. History for children should be a series of

## A Fairy Pageant

THE FAIRY CIRCUS. By DOROTHY P. LATHROP. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1931. \$3.

Reviewed by MARCIA DALPHIN

LAST year at this season a solemn reviewer of grown-up books wrote a piece on books for children in which he said with cutting mildness that after reading pages and pages of reviews of them he could never remember anything that was said. He meant, we suspect, not so much to criticize the ineptness of the reviewers as the poverty of the books. I wish there were any words in my vocabulary strong enough and persuading enough to beat on ears like his and make them know that here is a book for children which for qualities of beauty and imagination will stand comparison with the very best we have.

For perhaps a decade Dorothy Lathrop has been recognized as an illustrator of unusual quality. Her charming, highly interpretative drawings for Walter de la Mare's poetry and "The Three Mulla-Mulgars," for "The Princess and Curdie," and "Mopsa the Fairy," and the inimitable pictures for "Hitty," are known everywhere. Her illustration for Sara Teasdale's "Stars To-Night" added to those lovely verses a frosty, glittering wonder. Now, finally, she shows in "The Fairy Circus" that she is an artist in words as well as in line and color. Close your eyes to the pictures (if you can) and still you carry away a clear vision of the memorable night when the fairies were caught under a circus tent out in the meadow and, watching from the vantage points where they had scrambled for safety behind mullein stalks and blueberry bushes, admired, envied, and finally ended with the triumphant idea of having a

Or the possibilities in turtles for ponderous, heavy footed elephants? Or the efts as performing seals and the shrews as trick dogs, their little fat backs wrinkling as they stand on their fore feet?

In my opinion this is the picture book of the year—and of many years, and our children's children will be loving it to tatters as long as there is anyone left who reads fairy tales or goes to the circus. It is the kind of book in which each will have his favorite page. "I like best the baby field mice drawing the pony cart in the parade." "No, the best of all is the clown in the frontispiece running behind the snail and whipping him on." "Nonsense!" another will say, "The frightened fairy child in front of the snake charmer is the loveliest touch in the whole book!" And so it will go.

Possibly the most amazing thing about the whole enchanting book is the way in which Miss Lathrop has kept up the atmosphere of sustained excitement so characteristic of the real circus. Yet it is not an excitement which exhausts, like that of the sawdust ring. The action takes place in cool, green rings of moss lit by fireflies and there is a difference. Perhaps a clue to this difference may be found on the last page of the text with its accompanying picture—one of the most heart-breaking in the world, we should think. Little earth-bound creatures, the mole, the mouse, the efts, the chipmunk, and the turtle, they want dreadfully to play longer. But day is coming and the last fairy with half wistful head turned towards them flies away. It is play, delicious fooling—and fairy fooling, at that—that is the keynote of this book.

## Ireland's Wee Men

FROM THE HORN OF THE MOON. By ARTHUR MASON. Illustrated by ROBERT LAWSON. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PAULINE SUTORIUS AIRD.

IN the midst of the well-known and much-referred-to depression what could be more encouraging than that someone has the desire to write of the Wee Men? It's the next best thing to having the Wee Men among us. Faith, and what would we not do to have them move our own bog and throw it in the sea? Certainly never any one knew the Wee Men better than this Arthur Mason who writes so delightfully of their most intimate doings and their foolish pranks.

In his new book (and, by the way, if you haven't read it be sure to get a copy of "The Wee Men of Ballywooden," Mr. Mason's book of last year) the author tells three amusing incidents in the life of the Wee Men. "Willie the Waggoner" so angers the Tanner of Nets that he turns him into a codfish. But what of it? He wags just the same and prevents all successful fishing. Every night when the Wee Men go to sea they are greeted by the smirking cod and they return with nets empty. At last, the Knitter of Nets remembers Willie's love of purple and so the Tanner baits him with his purple nose by hanging his feet from the horn of the moon.

"The Moving of the Bog" is accomplished by the Wee Men finding a shadow large enough to cover it and the Keeper of the Casks of Time directs its course over the mountains.

"Pigs in the Castle" is a story of tapestry cut from moonlight shadows and of pigs who hide in the castle because it is market day.

There is no way to describe these stories. Someone has said that you have no right to read them unless you speak with a brogue. They are to be especially recommended for days when the world is too much with you.

The Wee Men have a way of telling you the things you most want to hear, and I read between the lines that there is to be a revival of fairy tales, and I doubt not that Arthur Mason will be chosen Chief Chronicler of the Wee Men and that Robert Lawson will be their portrait painter. It is truly a fascinating book to look at and one feels that Mr. Lawson must have sat by the author's side and drawn with a pen dipped in moonlight as he told the stories.



FROM "THE FAIRY CIRCUS."

near views, not fitted together into a philosophy or even very much into a chronological order. Let them see the trees clearly and sharply: it will be time enough later for them to see the wood.

So my conclusion is to beware of mixing education and art. It seems at first a very pleasant and plausible mixture, but it is all wrong really. Let your facts be clear and bright and well presented, but don't try to make them attractive with the sugar of fiction.

Naomi Mitchison is an English author who has received high praise from critics in both Great Britain and America for her novels and tales of classical and Anglo-Saxon times.

## Nursery Fixtures

By DAVID McCORD

BOOKS with pictures are nursery fixtures; Books without are banged about.

circus of their own then and there.

This conceit Miss Lathrop—using the familiar things in the woods that every country bred person knows, the flowers and fruit and fungi, the little moles and mice, and weaving them in to her fairy pageant both as background and actors—has worked out with a keenness of observation and perfection of detail that is sheer genius. It is amazing how the woods animals lend themselves to her fancy of them as circus performers. You might guess that the fairies would make the most graceful and fearless trapeze artists (they scorned to use their wings in this act), running up the ladders and jumping into the gauzy nets the spiders had spun; that they would be unexcelled in bareback riding and juggling with the dandelion puffs; that they would make the world's best clowns: but would you have thought of the squirrels as lions, with their tails twisted mane-like, round their necks, looking fierce and growling?