

Points of View

Stephen Crane Letters

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

I have discovered a large packet of Stephen Crane's unpublished writings including his notes for "Maggie, a Girl of the Streets," "The Red Badge of Courage," poems, stories, sketches, dialogues, and outlines for novels. Original versions of his most famous stories are also contained in the lot. I should like to communicate with those who have in their possession any unpublished writings, including letters. As Literary Manager of Crane's estate I remind the collector and publisher that the right to print for private distribution, or to publish for sale, any Stephen Crane material is retained by the estate as provided by law.

HARVEY TAYLOR.
59 West 46th Street, New York City.

An Author Replies

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

If you will kindly allow me the courtesy of your columns I should like to comment on your critic's review of "Four Handsome Negresses" which appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature* of August 8th. I fear this reply is belated but I have been abroad and only saw the review recently.

I have nothing to say concerning your critic's opinion of my style; that is entirely a personal matter, and Mr. Macdougall is just as likely to be right, or wrong, as any other critic. But what I should like to ask is, if Mr. Robert Macdougall has ever lived among primitive Africans, or has he built up his idea of black people on the inhabitants of Harlem? When he scoffs at the idea of the noble savage—his expression, not mine—it seems to me that he is sadly old-fashioned and behind the times. For there is throughout Africa an increasing conviction

amongst white people who know the primitives—and notably so outside the missionary groups—that perhaps after all Rousseau was not so far wrong; was less of a sentimentalist than the glorious Machine Age (not so glorious in the last eighteen months of surprising failure) would have us believe. I admit I have never read Rousseau on the noble savage any more than have half the critics who quote him with such fine effect. But I do know the savage, which is more to the point at the moment; and I do know the white man who exploits him as vigorously today as in the days when the Portuguese first rounded the Cape.

I know the African so well that in my book "Four Handsome Negresses" I took the utmost care that the picture of savage life should not be one-sided or idealized. I did not forget that constant scourge of Africa, the witch-doctor, nor the dreadful tortures inflicted by one black man on another at the witch-doctor's command. I did not forget the appalling power of superstition which is the greatest obstacle today in the progress of the primitive African towards civilization. I did not forget the unspeakable sorrows of the old and helpless. I did not forget the savagely indecent customs connected with sex which still blight primitive African society. All these dark patches are in the prologue of my book. Yet your critic, if he read so far, deliberately omits to mention them, and wishes his readers to understand that I have painted the savage state as an ideal state.

The truth is I dwell, not on the perfections of savage life, but on the comfort, to a wild soul, of Habit. However dreadful that Habit may be, it is precious to the savage. I challenge any critic to deny that this is my point of view plainly set out in the book for any intelligent reader.

Anyone who knows the distressing and pitiful homesickness of primitive Africans when removed even thirty miles from their tribe would bear out what I say. Missionaries in the past have reported

cases of death from sheer nostalgia, which they had observed in the slave gangs. About three years ago I myself was told by a missionary that a boy, i. e. a grown man of twenty-five, whom he was taking with him as a servant from one part of Africa to another, committed suicide rather than land in a strange harbor. This man let himself down the ship's side by a rope, deliberately descending until the water covered his head. Then he held on to the rope until he died by drowning.

As for Mr. Macdougall's curious accusation that I "display the spirit of Peeping Tom," he seems to be the first critic to discover it. A not very enviable distinction. May I very delicately remind him that "Honi soit . . ." There was a woman critic in England who said the book was lascivious, she herself being a successful writer of popular homosexuality. To her too I should like to whisper "Honi soit . . . ?"

Well, well; every author has to make the best of a bad job when his books are reviewed by folk who, to misquote Shakespeare, see "bad in everything."

HERNEKIN BAPTIST.

Madame Blavatsky

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

In a recent letter the editors of the *Aryan Path*, a journal "devoted to the consideration of the great ideas found in the principal literatures, philosophies, and religions of the world; of all activities . . . working for human betterment; of all movements which spiritually advance the thought of the race," condescended to neglect these aims for a moment in order to criticize my modest little review of C. E. Bechofer-Roberts's "The Mysterious Madame: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky." The weightiness of the magazine may justify a somewhat longer answer than the case would otherwise merit.

The charges against Mr. Bechofer-Roberts and myself are five in number and will be taken up seriatim.

(1) "The Mysterious Madame" merely repeats the story published in the *New York Sun* (on July 20, 1890), for which that paper was sued for libel and was driven to public apology; Mr. Bechofer-Roberts "brings up the same old charges, without any reference to the above recorded facts."

In reality, the libel suit, which was brought in Madame Blavatsky's name and his own by the American theosophist, William Quann Judge (who was later charged with fraud and trickery by Mrs. Annie Besant herself), was restricted to certain items in the *Sun* story, and the paper tried in vain to get the court's permission to introduce evidence substantiating the bulk of its story. The main item, reported on the hearsay testimony of the great American ornithologist, Elliott Coues, was that Madame Blavatsky had born a son to a certain Prince Emil Wittgenstein. Mr. Bechofer-Roberts, on the other hand, regards this child, who certainly existed, as the fruit of Madame Blavatsky's liaison with Baron Nicholas Meyendorff, a Russian (his information being derived directly from the Baron's sister), or as the result of a previous liaison with a Hungarian opera singer named Mitrovich (testified to by Madame Blavatsky's cousin, the statesman Sergius Witte in his "Memoirs"). The story is radically different from that told in the *Sun*, and the evidence is very much stronger. Equally incorrect is the statement of the editors of the *Aryan Path* that there is no reference in "The Mysterious Madame" to the *Sun* trial; the reader will find a paragraph devoted to it on pages 283-284.

(2) The reviewer was in error in stating that the two volumes of "Isis Unveiled" fell dead from the press on their appearance in 1877; to the contrary, a facsimile edition has recently been brought out by Madame Blavatsky's loyal students.

How the publication of a contemporary edition proves that the original one was favorably received fifty years ago I am too dull to make out. On its first appearance, "Isis Unveiled" was greeted by the *Springfield Republican* as "a large dish of hash," by the *New York Sun* as "discarded rubbish," by the *New York Tribune* as "crude and undigested"; the *New York Times* took no notice of it; Henry Steel Olcott, later president of the Theosophical Society, who had charge of its publication, confessed in his "Old Diary Leaves" (p. 217) that the publisher lost so much money on it that he refused to bring out a third volume of the work, although the manuscript was already prepared, and that Madame Blavatsky later destroyed

this manuscript in despair of finding a publisher for it.

(3) The reviewer's charge of plagiarism was unjust, since Madame Blavatsky explicitly disclaimed any novelty of ideas.

My critics are apparently unaware of the meaning of the word "plagiarism." It consists in the unacknowledged use, not of the idea, but of the direct words of another (in "Isis Unveiled" extending to whole pages). This is commonly considered an immoral practice, but I said nothing about that. I merely said that "Isis Unveiled" is a "mélange of plagiarisms," and it is.

(4) In his biography of Madame Blavatsky, Mr. Bechofer-Roberts failed to discuss the teachings of Theosophy—"the truths uttered by the great seers, sages, poets, writers existing in every nation from modern times extending back into the prehistoric past."

Mr. Bechofer-Roberts was not writing a universal encyclopedia. He does, however—what is more to the point—summarize the ideas of Madame Blavatsky's two major works, "Isis Unveiled" and "The Secret Doctrine." In so far as their teachings merely reproduce elements from ancient Hindu philosophy they have many admirable characteristics, but Madame Blavatsky's particular contribution was her wholly unauthentic claim to have received them by miraculous revelation from certain mythical Mahatmas dwelling in the Himalayas.

(5) "The History of the Theosophical Movement" should be consulted for the real facts concerning Madame Blavatsky.

This anonymous work, published in 1925, was obviously a product of the Tingley group of California theosophists, violently hostile to Olcott and Mrs. Besant. Its authors are not merely partisan but super-partisan. Nevertheless, it is an amusing production and will give the reader an excellent idea of the continual squabbles in the theosophical ranks. For the real facts concerning Madame Blavatsky, however, I would suggest that the reader, if he wishes to go behind Mr. Bechofer-Roberts, consult the following primary, not secondary, sources:

Proceedings of the British Psychical Research, vol. III (1885), containing Richards Hodgson's elaborate report on Madame Blavatsky's activities in India.

Mme. E. Coulomb, "Some Account of My Intercourse with Mme. Blavatsky from 1872 to 1884" (1885).

Franz Hartmann, "Observations during a Nine Months' Stay at the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society" (1884).

V. S. Solovyoff, "A Modern Priestess of Isis" (1895).

H. S. Olcott, "Old Diary Leaves" (1895).

A. P. Sinnett, "The Early Days of Theosophy in Europe" (1922).

"Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett" (1923).

ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES.

Spuyten Duyvil, N. Y. C.

Epistle to H. S. C.

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

I enclose an epistle to the author of "Classic Americans," inspired by the review of his book in *The Saturday Review*.

Hush, shut the sanctum door! turn the great key!

Plug up the keyhole with a sonnet! We, Like foxes run to earth, must pant and quail,

Aud curse the Fates who sent us both to Yale!

In whose relaxing atmosphere our hearts Untimely softened, like to lemon tarts

Left on the baker's counter over night: Our crusts are limp and soggy—none who bite

Into us now but nauseate the taste Of sodden pastry, deliquescent paste!

Critics from Harvard, Princeton, Oberlin Have stronger fillings and a tougher skin. Only at Yale is sentiment over-rated

And pusillanimous trimming inculcated. So says Van Doren (Carl), and Carl must know;

He writes so pompously, it must be so. Meanwhile, locked in here safely from the thunder

Of Carl's damp squib (a scarce nine seconds' wonder),

Smile, smoke your pipe, and leave your reputation

(Not to *The Nation*, no) but to the nation: You'll find it's growing nicely, sound and hale,

In spite of Carl and captiousness—and Yale.

X.

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The New Books

The books listed by title only in the classified list below are noted here as received.

Belles Lettres

CREATIVE CRITICISM AND OTHER ESSAYS. By J. E. SPINGARN. New and Enlarged Edition. Harcourt, Brace. 1931. \$2.

This is a reprinting of Mr. Spingarn's essay on the new criticism which at the time of its publication in this country introduced American writers to the critical ideas of Croce as modified and applied by the author. With it are included other essays written by Mr. Spingarn on dramatic criticism, the American critic, the American scholar, the new Humanism, and other topics.

Biography

THE KING OF THE BEGGARS. BAMPFYLDE-MOORE CAREW. Edited by C. H. WILLIAMSON. Oxford University Press. 1931. \$6.

This is a reprint of "The Life and Adventures of"—1745, and "The Apology for the Life of"—1749, with introduction, notes, and appendices. Carew died in 1759 after a number of years of more regular and reputable life. Both books were put together from his accounts of his adventures. The "Apology" abounds in moralizings that are probably not Carew's, but it contains his travels in America, which have interest. The "Life and Adventures" stops short with his going aboard the ship.

Fiction

PHANTOM FINGERS. By J. JEFFERSON FARJEON. Dial. 1931. \$2.

This book belongs to the category of shockers or thrillers rather than to that of the detective story proper; that is, it is not a novelized enigma, but a novelized melodrama. It is, indeed, a sort of sequel to the author's excellent stage melodrama, "Number 17," since it carries on the career of the little Cockney tramp, Ben, who rose to necessity and rounded up the crooks in that play. In this book he is again found at the beginning a destitute but cheery outcast, is again involved by chance in the affairs of important criminals, and again comes out on top. The story is a good example of its class, exciting but not too implausible, but Ben is better suited to the stage than to the page. His comic cowardice and sudden accesses of courage, are better material for an actor than for a reader's unaided imagination, and his excessively Cockney dialect, which can be amusing and agreeable to the ear, is likely to prove an irritation to the eye. But "Phantom Fingers" is better than the run of thrillers, and may be recommended to the addicts of this kind of book.

THE COMPELLED HERO. By RICHARD HERON WARD. Cape & Smith. 1931. \$2.50.

One generality concerning the intelligentsia, like all generalities, both true and false, is dear to the man in the street. It is that those in any way artistically inclined—and more especially expatriates—must needs "express" themselves in a wild Bohemian existence. "The Compelled Hero" has to do with just such a group in Paris. The book reveals their disease of "damn-cleverness" (a cliché, by the way, of the author's which occurs *ad nauseam*). Mr. Ward exposes unmercifully his young pseudo-intellectuals as posers all, "secretly becoming bitterly

ashamed," hating "many of the messy stupid things we did," but continuing them "because they were part of the Bohemian's stock-in-trade." All pretenders, save the beautiful heroine of the golden voice, who, aloof and chaste, is yet a friendly tolerant member of the clique. She, too, is finally sucked in—by the young English composer, Willy Caverne, her first lover. Her weakness lies in giving herself to the next man who needs her till she is destined to become "one of life's prostitutes."

In the introspective mood induced by the use of first person singular, Willy psycho-analyzes his companions and himself from cover to cover. A more utterly self-conscious lot of young people it would be difficult to find anywhere in fiction. Nor are their nationalities ever convincing to the reader. They are superficial types, like Justin, the exotic, much sought after painter, perpetually, noisily drunk; and Janus, moody Irish youth of eighteen, dominated by Conniss, cynical English author of sordid books; and the sensation-seeking American girl, Ellen Hawks.

The outspokenness with regard to physical details, and the crude references to sex, are reminiscent of Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms." But they are here without the excuse of war. And yet the force of the writer's criticism directed towards his crowd of wasters, vicious in their sheer futility, and pathetic in their mistaken values, redeems it in comparison with the flood of post-war books of the same order. Despite its somewhat worn and disillusioned philosophy, no sentimentality spoils the integrity of the whole. In this his first novel, Mr. Ward takes the world about which he is writing too seriously altogether. No amount of statement in the text to the contrary alters that fact.

THE CABIN IN THE COTTON. By HARRY HARRISON KROLL. Long & Smith. 1931. \$2.

Human greed has undoubtedly played its part in the tragedy of the cotton farmer, but the attempt of Harry Harrison Kroll in his first novel, "The Cabin in the Cotton," to reduce the tragedy of landlord and tenant in the cotton country to an impasse between top thieves and bottom thieves is convincing neither as fiction nor economics. Even less convincing is Mr. Kroll's dénouement when robber tenant and robber landlord are shown like sinners at a Methodist revival, the way to a salvation based on the dictum that honesty is the best policy.

This reviewer pretends to be no cotton farmer nor any farm expert but anyone reared in the continually tragic cotton growing sections of the South knows that the troubles which have attended the decades of low prices, relieved only by the World War, have not grown from the simple greed of thieves. Tenants have stolen and landlords have cheated but the tragedy lies in the diverse, far from local, factors touching the crop itself. Thoughtful men in the South have studied these problems for decades. They have advised diversification. They have urged coöperation. Both have been widely tried. Both have been helpful. Neither has been able to solve the bitter problems of the cotton-growing man. The villain of this Southern tragedy is neither landlord nor tenant. Cotton is King, but Southerners also know that Cotton is a Devil.

From a literary standpoint Mr. Kroll's book suffers from those defects which commonly attend the discussion of an economic question under the guise of fiction. From sympathy with the poor whites he draws his planter class and particularly the nymphomaniac daughter of the planter in terms of gross caricature. On the other side of the struggle, his poor whites, even though sentimentalized, are figures of far greater reality. In the handling of these characters and in the descriptions of the plantation Mr. Kroll shows abilities worthy of a better book.

Miscellaneous

CLASSICAL STUDIES IN HONOR OF JOHN C. ROLFE. Edited by George Depue Hadzsis. University of Pennsylvania Press. \$3.

HOLYWOOD UNDRESSED. By Sylvia Brentanos. \$2.

THE BANKS AND PROSPERITY. By Lionel D. Edie. Harpers. \$2.50.

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