



THE BOOK INDUSTRY

Here's a pretty state of things!
Here's a pretty howdy-do!

THE Cheney report,* just issued by the National Association of Book Publishers, blows the lid off the book industry. It is a significant document for the future of the illusive thing we call intelligence in our contemporary American life. Not just for "literary" America, but for every man-jack of us confronted by unemployment, international debts, the rearing of children, and the other complexities and potentialities of modern living, it is an event of first-rate importance. For in a very real sense the book industry is a sort of neck of the bottle through which we receive the most effective thinking of our contemporary world addressed to the understanding and control of ourselves and our environment.

The book industry is not the private concern of the little group of business men engaged in it, but a public utility. The "trade" has a fine tradition of public service. This tradition has worn thin of late at many points under the pressure of modern competitive merchandising, and some in the trade have in fact showed signs of abandoning it altogether for a brisk, public-be-damned attitude. Despite the national business policy of "ragged individualism," the tide is beginning to set at a number of points in our business culture towards a tentative recognition that the provision of necessities partakes of the nature of a public service. It should be a matter of no small pride to the trade that in the making of this study and the public issuing of this report, with the promise both carry for a sounder functioning by the industry, it is resuming its position high among the industries willing to view their role imaginatively in terms of their social function.

As a matter of fact it was not wholly altruism that prompted the undertaking of this study of the economic structure of the industry by the National Association of Book Publishers, with financial coöperation from the allied trades. The decision to make the study grew out of a healthy apprehension over the state of the industry, a condition by no means caused by the depression though considerably aggravated by it. Mr. Cheney says at the outset, "The book industry as a whole is not backward compared with any other industry as a whole" and "—there are few, if any, industries, big or little, which can claim fewer serious problems." Without defending the wasteful, creaking practices that hobble current business enterprise, it is possible to say that the above quotations are over-optimistic and that the body of the report, following this pleasant introduction, proves this.

The present reviewer found in working over the Census of Manufactures statistics of production in some two hundred American industries that the published statistics of the book industry are, despite the best efforts of the Census offices, among the least reliable of the entire group—ranking with the chaotic furniture industry. Mr. Cheney stresses repeatedly the inadequacy of the existing statistics of the industry, saying that, "In this respect, the book industry is far behind the majority of the others." The industry is characterized by him as "at present organized to kill demand as quickly as possible." "Illiteracy is of no importance to the industry compared with the economic illiteracy of those in it." A current trade practice is spoken of as "one of the natural concomitants of blind publishing and blind distribution." Of the credit structure of the industry the Report says:

This structure, as it stands now, is an

insecure conglomeration of some members substantial in themselves, tied together in a haphazard way to very weak members—the whole ornamented by "bright ideas" precariously projected, and at the same time corroded and undermined by inefficiency, unsound competitive practices, blindness, fear, and the sycophancy and brutality which spring from fear.

The industry is characterized by the author of the Report as "little business," requiring both on its publishing and book-selling sides relatively little capital. But its difficulties are not wholly traceable to size. It is a very special sort of little business, attracting a type of personality frequently averse or maladapted to the rugged, often ruthless, "businesslike" methods of the street, blessed and cursed by the "literary" tradition and by self-conscious respectability, over-dominated by nepotism, dependent on the most incalculable source of raw material confronting any industry, a mysterious little business of slender margins and relatively very high frequency of obsolescence of product and of necessary speculation on new titles, a business in which "the banker and the publisher have hardly learned to talk each other's language."

The book industry is a sick public personage. And like any important man in a public position a time comes when it can no longer trade on its honorable lineage and traditions and insist on its rights to privacy in a dubious private life. Mr. Cheney anticipates objections from within the trade, on the ground that the book industry is "different" and not to be judged by ordinary standards, that "we have nothing to learn," that the entire plan for the study was abortive, and that the industry has nothing to gain from coöperative effort. Actually, the very complexities of the book business make the assuming of a lofty pose on sentimental grounds the less tolerable. If the Report means anything it means that the book industry must be more business-like and coöperative than many another industry wherever it can in order to afford to be more hazardous and therefore ostensibly more unbusiness-like where it should and must because of the nature of its product. The Report will have to fight for its life in the trade if these inescapable next steps are not simply to be "received and filed" by the industry. This widespread publication in book form, however, augurs well for the fact that a dominant group in the industry do not mean to let the matter die here.

Before taking up for detailed consideration the diagnosis of this sickness offered by the Report, it is not inappropriate to raise bluntly a point already raised by implication: What is the aim of the book industry? The very fact of assimilating publishing and bookselling, with their large elements of creative, personal, valuable activity to the category of an "industry" tends to force our consideration of its role into certain stereotyped patterns of "manufacturing," "merchandising," "volume," "turnover" and "productive efficiency" applicable to automobiles, electric refrigerators, and canned soup. The title of the Report, "Economic Survey of the Book Industry," emphasizes these considerations. As a result, broad as is the perspective of the Report, it omits specific treatment, for example, of the all-important consideration of the public's stake in each step of the publishing and distributing process. The Report, so framed within the categories of industrial practices, omits consideration of the criteria by which these practices are to be judged.

Take the matter of book prices, for instance. A chart reveals the well-known low percentage of books priced at \$4.00, with the percentages of titles published at \$3.50 and at \$5.00 towering almost equally on either side and the percentage

of \$3.00 books almost as high as the \$3.50 and \$5.00 percentages. The publisher's familiar avoidance of a \$4.00 price is based on the assumption that "You can get \$5.00 for a book as easily as you can get \$4.00." What is the price policy of the trade? The report contents itself with an analysis of trends in actual prices set on books over the three-year period, the statement of the importance of volume as affecting price, the statement that, "the dollar new book experiment did not prove or disprove that the price of new books could be radically cut," and the conclusion that "the price structure of the book industry . . . is a growth which has developed over many years. Unfortunately, it is a growth which roots in hazardous soil and branches in darkness." Here and there in publishing, notably in the Home University Library, the Modern Library, Everyman's, and in reprints of classics by such houses as the Oxford University Press, one sees a definite "policy" at work to issue sound books as widely as possible at the lowest possible price. Some of the better university presses, taking their obligations to scholarship seriously, have in general sought the lowest possible prices compatible with the difficult nature of their technical materials. On the other hand at least one prominent publisher has had a policy in the opposite direction which has said in effect: "Prices are too low. If people want a book they will buy it and there are enough people to buy at my price to give me my profit. So push up prices." Most publishers, harried by the uncertainties of publishing, largely follow the price tradition of the industry, pushing up the price of fiction to \$2.50 when they think they can "get away with it," and dropping back to \$2.00 in times like these.

An even sharper test of the industry's price policy appears in the case of books that have made good and paid handsomely. By and large, and short of an assured new and widespread distribution at a cheaper price, publishers usually see "no point"—and it does not occur to the Cheney report to raise it—in a definite policy of letting the intelligent reading public participate in a title's success when assured income warrants. The alleged benefit of a competitive economy is that it takes care of just such cases—and it does after a fashion in bread, soup, cigarettes, but not in books. Such a point as this will seem fantastic to most publishers and one has large sympathy with their position in view of their losses on other titles and of the pressure of authors for royalties. The reason for raising the point here is not to argue for it, but to underscore this significant omission by the "Economic Survey" of the aims of the book industry defined in terms wide enough to include not merely economic considerations of profit and loss but also the purposes and concerns of books and readers.

One of the important reiterations throughout the report is the need to "discover the reader"—meaning the analysis of who read books, why, how, and where. "The industry has been so concerned with the book that it has forgotten the reader." Analyses are offered of population distributed geographically by occupation, reader literacy, periodical circulation, income, per capita consumption of necessities and luxuries according to the recent Federal Census of Distribution, "cultural level," and actual potential sales of books. Insofar as these are not simply republications of standard data, one has no way of judging their adequacy, since here as elsewhere through the Report there is an almost total failure to divulge the statistical bases for the figures given. From this technical standpoint, the new data spread throughout the Report are so veiled—either through its essential inadequacy as in the analysis of reading habits of small samples of bankers and religious workers, or through inexperience, through a desire to cover up the inexact-

ness of the estimates, or through the pressure within the industry to disguise absolutely all conceivable marks of identification as to source—as to leave one almost precisely where one was before, in the dark. But in the course of the emphasis upon the need to discover the reader, excellent as that emphasis is, one feels again the limitation of the Report's—and this applies to the industry generally—concern for the reader: Find out about him in order to sell him more books. A perfectly good point of view, but how about the reader's share in the business?

The Report sensibly refuses to sanction the present breaking up of the industry into two processes—publishing and book-selling. It insists upon the publisher's share in the responsibility for a book until it is sold. But there it stops. Mr. Cheney insists that a book is not sold by the publisher until it is sold by the retailer. And why stop there under our present publishing methods, wherein the value of a publisher's imprint is "in most cases, under present conditions, almost negligible" as signifying anything to the reader about the worth of the book; in which publishers' jacket blurbs and advertising are for the most part brazenly directed at selling the book rather than at helping the reader to decide whether or not he wants the book; in which book reviewing tends to be largely favorable and largely uncritical in any thoroughgoing sense; and in which booksellers buy their stocks largely in the dark and make little pretense to knowing anything essential about the insides of the books they sell or about the needs of the bulk of the people to whom they sell? At a time when many American industries have been forced by competition and the movement towards standardization and brand reputability to abandon the obfuscation and bamboozling of the consumer that characterized the backwoods era of wooden nutmeg bartering, the book industry continues to adhere as standard practice to levels of disguise, non-information, and misinformation in marketing its nutmegs that sometimes almost rival current cigarette merchandising.

And Mr. Publisher and Mr. Bookseller, some of us burnt children are becoming warier every day! For your own sakes, can you afford to turn your backs on what happens after one of us readers takes your word for it and gives you our hard-earned money for a book? Isn't an inevitable step, if much lost ground of reader confidence is to be regained and your businesses rehabilitated, the carrying on of publisher's and bookseller's responsibility to the stage of regarding no book as sold until the reader either is glad he bought it or decides, against your ballyhoo, that he doesn't want it? The Report speaks of the industry's concern over lack of shelf space in modern compact homes and of the efforts by the trade to increase the frequency of built-in shelving in new homes. And yet, every book on my shelves that I am sorry I bought, that I feel that I might better have skimmed for its meagre fare in a library copy, is a standing argument to me not to buy books. The old books I'll never reread but which I store on top shelves in closets or in the basement because they cost me good money, fairly shout to me whenever I get my overcoat out of the hall closet, "Don't buy us—use a library." Until the book industry is willing to service in an out-and-out fashion its invaluable final link, the consumer, the latter's resistance is going to continue one of the avoidable things that make the industry so sick. Fewer meretricious books published, more honest and better informed reader-information about books, more second-hand stores called by more dignified names, "once-read" counters of virtually fresh current books resold by readers to "new" bookstores at something better than fifteen or twenty cents on the dollar, and an aggressive coöperative policy of buying

*ECONOMIC SURVEY OF THE BOOK INDUSTRY: 1930-31. Final Report. By O. H. CHENEY. National Association of Book Publishers. 1932.

by Robert S. Lynd

up, retiring, and scrapping old, worthless books in publishers' stock-rooms, in new and second-hand bookstores, and in home libraries are among the things that would help to this end.

At the very outset the industry faces a unique difficulty in the nature of its raw materials. Really good manuscripts are not mined, quarried, or fabricated and cannot be scheduled to meet the exigencies of an assembly line. One is tempted to say that it is usually a mistake when a publisher, merchandising under steadily pressing overhead, attempts to put authors on an assembly schedule. And yet, the Report speaks of "building up an author" as one of the chief creative functions of the publisher. One wonders whether a prime mistake is the professionalization of authorship, the encouragement of people to try to spin books out of their viscera fast enough to support them financially—a procedure that has had disastrous results for "literature," for "creative insight," for "close, hard-bitten, careful thinking" in current periodical writing?

The results of current "author building" and professionalized authorship have long and aggravating ramifications down through the industry. The report says: "Most of the readable books in the specialized fields are simply 'finds.'" Also, "A book has to be very bad not to be published." "There is a tendency for standards to deteriorate—publishers will try to take advantage of a public interest by setting a ninth-rate writer to work on a tenth-rate book." At present publishers are so busy building competitive lists and developing manuscripts ("over a period of the past ten years, the number of titles has been increasing more rapidly than the number of publishers") that they are charged in the Report with being poor merchants. What would happen if they shifted the shoes over and returned to earlier, more modest traditional policies of waiting more passively for mature manuscripts that really are "finds" and were to put a corresponding increment of their time and energies into a type of merchandising that penetrated to the ultimate satisfied consumer? The publishers say, according to the Report, that they will publish better manuscripts when there are better manuscripts to publish. Are present policies, as in the periodical field and in the face of hopeless competition of the periodicals for just good enough manuscripts ("—in too many cases the material in books is the same as the periodical material"), simply ending in fouling the publishers' own nests?

The time pressure, wasteful skimping, and "gambling methods" involved in handling lists of the present size under current methods is roundly brought out by the Report. "... in only a negligible proportion of cases do publishers make any attempt to study the distribution of individual titles except for use in making up 'quotas' in particular cases for particular stores." "... almost the entire promotional efforts of the industry, with the exception of reprint publishing, is devoted to 'putting over' new books." And yet we read of "the usual lack of a merchandising program for each title"; "the prevailing ignorance throughout the house as to why a specific title may be expected to sell"; the "lack of coordination between the men on the road and the home office"; "the acceptance of a manuscript by a publisher, under present conditions, means that in a majority of cases a book will receive a christening celebration, a short—and frequently ignoble—life, and an early death, without peace. The manuscripts which escape this fate are few and far between, and the books we hear about are usually those which escape"; "the industry is at present organized to kill demand as quickly as possible. There are relatively few titles which survive this organized book murder"; "the life of a book is one of the most terrifying phenomena of publishing—and it will

continue to be so as long as the industry works on the spawning theory"; "the most frequent length of active life is between four and five months. Charts of a large number of life histories of all types of titles show a monotonous repetition of the same life cycle"; "... the competition between books ... prevails at every step in the publishing and distributing process"; "of the total number of new trade books available, not sixty per cent achieve fair representation in bookstores, and of those that do, not ten per cent receive even fair merchandising attention"; "the publisher's function is clearly to protect the public from bad books—but it is just as vital to protect good books from bad ones. To this task the present system of reading by publishers is not adapted"; "the making of the list is a process usually involving a struggle between firm faith in the spawning theory; the theory of the 'balanced list'; wavering doubts which arise only to be defeated; 'minor' considerations, like the bills payable condition of the business, and the 'wows.' During the making of a list, the unexpected arrival of a 'wow' has almost come to be expected"; "the 'balanced list' is one of the major causes of inflation—next to the lottery theory that the more titles the more good sellers"; "the economy of lists is too often based on the principle that two titles can live more cheaply than one—and the fact that both may die young as a result does not seem to affect the popularity of the principle."

And one could seemingly go on indefinitely with such quotations.

The upshot of this galaxy of procedure is the statement that

the "average" of all types of publishing houses will receive about seventy-five per cent of its total annual income for the year's new titles from about ten titles. ... The average operating probability is that the first quarter of a list will produce sixty to seventy per cent of the income and the other three-quarters only thirty to forty per cent.

In so far as the non-profitable or less-profitable titles represent the problem of publishing thoroughly good manuscripts of limited appeal, such a situation is not a matter to be deplored but rather one of the traditional important public services of the industry. But in view of the foregoing paragraph the situation, it would seem, can hardly be rationalized thus gracefully:

Best-sellarization is clearly accepted by the industry as an economic principle, just as best-sellarism is clearly accepted as a promotional principal. ... The number of publishers who give each one of their books a reasonable fair chance to make its way is so limited that there is no escaping the fact that the book industry is best-sellarized to the point of death by suffocation. The industry has made a fetish of the accident. It looks forward forever to the unexpected.

The evidence of this Survey is that the success or failure of a book is not an unanalyzable phenomenon—that the industry does very definite things which kill books and, in the wasteful and expensive process of promotion and distribution, it does certain things, generally "accidental," which make best-sellers. The evidence of this Survey is that the industry need not be at the mercy of an unpredictable and an unknown consumer.

Chaotic as are the methods of management and control in the publishing function of list-making, they seem to be almost organized compared with the conditions involved in the functions of selling. The Report disposes swiftly of the convenient claim by the publisher that the bookseller's position is his own "fault." Publisher and bookseller are permanently wedded for better or for worse.

The tragedy of the book industry is a tragedy without a villain. ... The "system" of publishing and bookselling has developed—or rather proliferated—like a diseased cell. Bookselling is what it is today because for years the publishers have been handing to the booksellers a task which is only a few

chances removed from hopelessness—and the bookseller has fumbled at least half those chances.

Nor can the industry look to the unaided rise of distribution outlets, for,

under conditions which have prevailed in the industry in general and in book-selling in particular new outlets of any importance cannot be added fast enough—or, if they could, would find it difficult to reach profit-operation quickly. The majority of new outlets can never become bookstores through present efforts or under the conditions in the industry.

The forces which make readers and which improve them are not organized enough. The present methods of increasing the number of outlets are, in general, haphazard and ineffective—and, in some instances, cruel. The present methods of increasing the effectiveness of book outlets are so feeble as to be negligible. Very little, if any, organized effort is being made to improve distribution from the publisher to the retailer.

The book clubs which have arisen in the last few years are not regarded as a menace to publisher or bookseller.

The book clubs became a "menace" because the book industry always needs a menace. ... The book club will take its place as a useful, but minor, factor in distribution—it will never be a "menace" and it will never constructively revolutionize anything.

Reviewing in all types of media comes in for pointed treatment. In newspapers reviews are "written for the authors, publishers, and other critics—and for the occasional 'booklover,'" and in media in general, "because it is difficult to set up and use objective standards and, apparently, still more difficult to know the audience, the literary editors and critics are thrown back on themselves. They naturally tend to become spotlight entertainers. They write about themselves on the slightest provocation by a book. Criticism became 'the adventure of a soul among masterpieces.'"

Is it not likely that, living as we do, not in the eighteenth century nor even in the mid-nineteenth century, with the most amazing volume of available reading matter in social science, the natural sciences, technology, and the arts ever available, beset as we are by new awarenesses of the complexity of living effectively by the aid of what new information we can ingest, sore beset for time to read, and needing working tools of appraisal of this wide mass of new reading—in the face of this situation the prevailing old-fashioned "literary" review is simply begging the job of a review medium in this twentieth century? Are not new review techniques, swift, clean-cut, by professionals in the subject matter involved rather than in reviewing, needed to supplement or to displace the older type of chatty "literary" medium? The overwhelming attention paid to fiction, as pointed out in the Report, is a phase of this old-fashioned tradition and of the breathless over-emphasis by publishers upon their hoped-for best-sellers and budding authors in the "making." Of 757 reviews recognizing "definite and unqualified reactions" in a recent six-months period, 726 were "only favorably reviewed" and but thirty-one "only unfavorably reviewed." "Is criticism weak? Or is it merely big-hearted?" the Report asks, and pays its respects to the log-rolling reviewing claque which throws "bouquets of century plants."

... the most important contributing cause [of the inadequacies of current criticism] is the dearth of policy. What criticism needs of itself—and what the book industry needs of criticism—is a thorough reexamination of editorial and critical policies—not the rearrangement of space or the ballyhooing of names in a futile scramble for book lineage.

And on pp. 115-16 a searching list of possible policies and standards it set down.

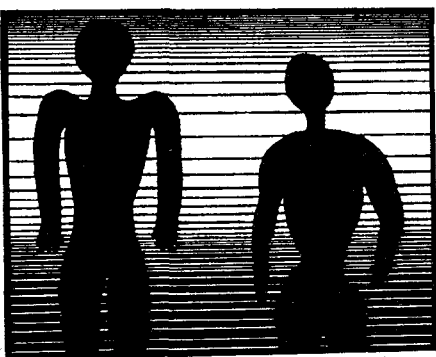
The closing seventeen pages of the Re-

port consists of specific recommendations. "—no single major solution is possible. ... The industry has no problems but common problems." Under Improving the Distributing Machinery there are recommendations regarding the systematic rehabilitation by concerted action of retail outlets; the integration of merchandising through the development of a merchandising plan for each title before it is shown to the bookseller; the inauguration of controlled experimentation to determine the pulling power of advertising media and the elimination of the unfit; the improvement of wholesale distribution, including the setting up of a depository on the Pacific Coast; the control, encouragement, and, in improper locations, the discouragement of new outlets; and the inauguration of joint operating corporations, of publishers to carry on research and joint promotional and sales activities, and of booksellers to conduct joint operations such as buying, research, and merchandising. Under Reducing Wastes and Losses are recommendations regarding better record-keeping and standardization. Under Increasing Reading and Book Buying are suggested the coordination into a central body or council of the various independent bodies concerned with educating adult and juvenile readers, the encouragement of research into reading habits, the organization of book exhibits and lecture programs, the revision of the present book reviewing situation, the elimination of misleading advertising, provision of simpler books for the less intellectual portion of the population, and a program to encourage library readers to become buyers. Under Redistributing Burdens and Hazards are proposals for the redistribution of the hazards inherent in the industry in better accord with responsibility, and likewise under Improving Trade Relations and Accelerating the Flow of Money are recommendations for removing many credit and other sore spots in the industry.

The Report does not pretend to be anything more than a ground-clearing, question-raising survey. It proves nothing, settles nothing in itself. Its factual basis, as suggested above, is so disconcertingly vague that its chief significance is not so much its test-borings after quantitative data as the penetration of the questions it raises more informally. For not in Duffus's "Books" or in Robert Stirling Yard's "The Publisher," or in any other available form has anything like so much pointed probing been done into the industry.

The test of the matter comes now that the survey is done. Will the industry have the courage to undertake the more serious, longer-term job so clearly needed. Part of this work is promotional and can be done by no other agency than the industry. Part of it involves a rigorous and continuous procedure of fact-finding. The Cheney plan suggests that this fact-finding program be undertaken by the industry itself through an independent organization to be set up for research and promotional purposes. Another program, offering certain obvious advantages, calls for the setting up of a five-year joint program of research into the problems of the industry, to be conducted for the industry by the Business School of Columbia University. However the details may be worked out, it is to be hoped that nothing will block the ultimate following up of the beginning here so notably made.

Robert S. Lynd was from 1914-18 assistant editor and managing editor of the book-trade journal, *The Publishers' Weekly*, and later advertising manager of *Charles Scribner's Sons' trade-book department*. For a year and a half he studied American culture in detail in "Middle-town." He was until recently Permanent Secretary of the national Social Science Research Council and is at present directing the study of Consumption Habits for President Hoover's Research Committee on Social Trends.



THE EMERGENCE OF MAN

BY GERALD HEARD

"The Life Force long ago decided that intelligence should lead."
—Gerald Heard

The half-man left the tree, to play, to roam, to outwit the great beast.

He left the cave with a set of conscious reactions—no longer an animal.

Centuries later, in Egypt, the first individual was born.

"This then is the fundamental fact about man's history, that his mind is an emerging mind . . . Man's real history can only be told as the history of an emergence into a fuller and more general awareness of himself, of life and of the world." —Gerald Heard

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—Julian Huxley

"So excellent . . . so stimulating that I should be doing a disservice were I to refrain from booming it for all I am worth. It is readable, brilliant and sound. One feels that some new explanation, some new encouragement has entered life." —Harold Nicolson

THE EMERGENCE OF MAN

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Some Recent Fiction

A Tennessee Tale

THE WEATHER TREE. By MARISTAN CHAPMAN. New York: The Viking Press. 1932. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

IN spite of its thin but appealing tale "The Weather Tree," the third novel by Mary and Stanton Chapman about their well beloved Tennessee mountains, is lifted above mediocrity by fine drawings of highland characters and by the strangely wrought but beautiful native prose in which the book is written. The novel would be a better book if the Chapmans, knowing the mountains so well, did not love them quite so obviously and quite so much.

The story begins almost pastorally on Red Hill, above the village of Glen Hazard, where the laurel is growing over the scars of abandoned coal mines. Lynn Clayton, the outlander, comes with dreams of progress and industry and social welfare, to develop the mines he has inherited, to make cheap coal-brick for the city poor, and to give employment and uplift to the people of the mountains. After him comes Lida Grant, the city girl, who has lent him the money to develop his mines. He breaks the mountain peace with loud intrusions. He builds houses; he chops trees; he would make Red Hill stark naked in his progress. Definitely Glen Hazard does not wish to be uplifted. It wishes only to be left alone and to be rid of this stranger. Yet the mountaineers present a tangible resistance only when Clayton's axemen touch Uncle Billy Whiteoak, the Weather Tree. The mountain confidence of "weathering" him out is disturbed only when he and Thelma Lane, the mountain heroine, fall in love. This simple narrative is deliberately accelerated by leading the love story through misunderstanding into a conventional mountain melodrama of revenge. The solution of the story, Thelma Lane's choice in loyalty, the departure of the outlander, grow out of misunderstandings created by difference in language and spirit of outlander and mountaineer. The solution is abortive but Glen Hazard settles into a peace that is real and the laurel grows back over the mines.

The central figures of the story, the outlanders, Lynn Clayton and Lida Grant, and, to a less degree, Thelma Lane and her brother Chad, are conventional figures, almost types for outland impertinence and mountain simplicity. The Lane household is an idealization of the simple life and the simple, strong, inarticulate man and woman. Opposed to this idealization, the newcomers are made unreal by a complete lack of sympathy in their drawing. Both are callow and insensitive figures from a familiar background of big house and green lawn, thin dishes and shining glass. Their meagerness makes less moving the conflict of the novel and less convincing the idealization of Glen Hazard.

With the detachment which the authors lost in drawing these characters, they have made in their minor characters a vivid community of true people. There are the three towers of Glen Hazard strength, the doctor, the preacher, the sheriff. Doc Peters practices good without believing in it. Preacher Howard begins his preaching not with Creation but with here and now. To the mountain people, Sheriff Joe Marks "had been a habit since long along and they were known just how much he would stand." A lesser figure in the community but no less in the story is Uncle Shannon Budd who pronounced himself "innocent as an un-burst robin's egg" but who was good for nothing but "to sit in a corner and foretell a hard winter." Other characters, Squirrel Mercy, Hurd Foster, Lum Morgan, are all natural and living, people as real as the mountains.

Not only in the dialogue but in their own narrative as well, Mr. and Mrs. Chapman use the forms, the words, the rhythms of mountain speech. Their metaphors and images are highland. The result is no dialect difficult to read but a vital native prose enriched by vigorous mountain and forgotten old English words. As it is shaped in "The Weather Tree" this language is not only beautiful but it seems, too, the inevitably proper language for the book.

The novel is the first to appear since the announcement that all of the Chapman books have been written in collaboration by Mr. and Mrs. Chapman and that the name Maristan is not the first name of Mrs. Chapman but a combination of the first names of both. "The Weather Tree" is the January choice of the Book League of America and is the second of their novels to be selected by a book club.

Middle-Class Annals

THE NIGHT VISITOR: And Other Stories. By ARNOLD BENNETT. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

WE were mostly agreed that "Imperial Palace" was no more than a fair to middling short story stretched out upon the rack, its sinews cracking at every page. It was saved from a sort of grisly tedium by those characters in it who appeared briefly and inconclusively and were held in no great honor. Just for that reason it was not so unfortunate as it might have been that this was the last novel Bennett wrote before he died: and just for that reason "The Night Visitor" does no violence to his reputation.

To be honest, these stories are not very good; the point is that the characters in them are the sort of people we should pass over in real life. They belong to that class which is equally barred from the best Mayfair drawing rooms and the best Limehouse public-houses . . . the great English middle class, the class of Oxford undergraduates, commercial travellers, and conservative M.P.s, the class which believes in dealing firmly with India. It despises itself with such complacent arrogance that most of the world holds it in contempt and awe; it is considered humdrum and materialistic; but of all aggregations of humanity it is perhaps the most romantic. It spends its idle hours in dreaming of what it can never be—which, if you like, is quite stupid and quite human.

Certainly no English writer of our time has been so much in sympathy with this class as Arnold Bennett, or had such a sense of its variety, or was so aware of its inward thoughts and of the strange pattern of its outward life. His best characters are always the obscure of this world. But whereas in actual life such people hope that anything may happen, and nothing does happen: in Arnold Bennett's fiction, more real than reality, they hope that anything may happen, and lo! it is so. I say this in the belief that the true Bennett was the Bennett of "Mr. Prohack" and not the Bennett of "Riceyman Steps"; and that his enduring work was the translation of unuttered and unfulfilled desires into the warmth of life and the finality of action.

Almost all the characters—certainly all the living characters—in "The Night Visitor" are symbols of an understanding and sympathy which, of its kind, can hardly be equalled in English fiction. They may be imperfect symbols, but they are not conventional symbols. The young men are generally good looking, well-dressed, and intelligent—which is a sin against the modern short story; and they have the singular temerity not to be disillusioned. The middle-aged men are affectionate,

whimsical, and financially secure. The ladies have some claim to beauty and are successful in their love affairs. The cloak room attendant owns an exquisite mansionette and an exquisite wife; the young and rather priggish don claims his passionate young beauty from baccarat and society. No heart beats in vain and every lane has a turning. . . .

Arnold Bennett's enduring work was to discover the infinite strangeness of the commonplace, and the result was that his more indifferent performances had generally a commonplace appearance. Perhaps this criticism could be brought against most of these stories. There is only little to stand between them and mechanical ingenuity; but that little bears its witness to a great personality. Bennett was often dull, incoherent, even vulgar; he wrote at most one great novel and at least three wretched ones; but few men have brought such warmth to life, and in his time he did more for English fiction than almost any other half dozen writers you could mention.

A Religious Fanatic

EBENEZER WALKS WITH GOD. By GEORGE BAKER. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1931. \$2.

Reviewed by ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

THIS is a curious, highly original work, half realism, half grotesque fantasy, leaving the reader considerably perplexed as to the author's purpose. It tells the story of a pious and ignorant elder of Zion Chapel who in his old age is led by his equally pious and ignorant wife to adopt an orphaned grand-nephew. At first, the elder, in his puritanical zeal, is troubled by his wife's devotion to the child, but, after a nervous breakdown, when he recovers, it is with a fixed delusion that the child is the Son of God. The bulk of the book is taken up with the effects of this delusion on the old man Ebenezer, his wife Elizabeth, and the child Paul. Elizabeth repudiates the connection and henceforth regards her husband as a combination of lunatic and blasphemer. Ebenezer takes the child and wanders off, first into the poorer section of London, and then into the hop fields of Kent. The book moves for a time into the *genre* style, with realistic pictures of the hop-workers and much use of dialect. Ebenezer wins friends among his new companions by his amiability and general harmlessness, and their attitude toward his delusion—one of half-contemptuous skepticism mingled with a vague, unconfessed fear that he may be right—is very well brought out.

One gets a vivid impression of the fertile soil for religious mysticism that still exists among those below the educational level even in these modern days. Had Ebenezer been younger or a character of more force, he might have succeeded in founding a new sect. To have done so, however, he would have needed personal ambition and an organizing ability, both of which he was quite without. As it is, he merely dies, leaving behind him only a pitying, kindly memory among his associates in the hop-fields, and unassuaged indignation on the part of his wife and her friends. The book is weakest in its treatment of the child. Paul is a pale, unconvincing creature; in so far as he is characterized at all, he is a dull, priggish youngster, who follows Ebenezer's lead uncomprehendingly; one is left entirely in doubt as to how far his future will be affected by his early experiences. Perhaps this was exactly the impression which the author sought to convey; it is quite in harmony with the tentative, exploratory character of the whole book; but it is too great a demand on the reader to expect him to be interested in such a nonentity.