

Rabelais in New Dress

THREE GOOD GIANTS. Compiled from the French of François Rabelais, by JOHN DIMITRY. Illustrated by GUSTAVE DORÉ and A. ROBIDA. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by E. PRESTON DARGAN

CERTAINLY, there were giants in those days. Chalbroth was the great-grandfather of Hurlali, who rode upon the Ark. And Hurlali, after fifty-four generations, was the ancestor of Grandgousier. And Grandgousier, he of the Great Gullet, begat Gargantua, and Gargantua begat Pantagruel, the All-Thirsty. (These became the Three Good Giants.) And Maistre François Rabelais, having begotten them all, lived some three-score years and was gathered unto his fathers. But some say that he first called the three last-born unto his bedside and addressing them as bemired and jolt-headed So-and-So's, adjured them by This and That to go forth into the world of wine and oil and to achieve, with a murrain upon their What-do-you-call-it, the Prowesses that he had predicted for them. For he was a holy man and spake a seemly language.

Be that as it may, is it not related in the Chronicles how all these deeds that he foretold were in truth accomplished? We read of the Prowess of the jolly Grand-Gullet, whose whole life was a continual dinner; we hear of how Gargantua was born, with some difficulty, and how his first word was *Drink!* of the thousands of cows that gave him milk, and of the huge suits that he wore.

Of how he studied Latin forty-eight years without learning it, and must therefore go to Paris. Of the Mare as big as six elephants who carried him thither. Of how he stepped up the towers of Notre-Dame and bore off her bells to jingle around his Mare's neck. Of how he learned 215 card-games and much more besides, through losing no single hour of the day.

And we read of the still stranger exploits of his son, Pantagruel, the All-Thirsty. As a babe, he slew a bear and broke his cradle to bits. As a student of the Arts, he lifted a great stone and the enormous buried bell of the City of Orleans. He out-argued the doctors of the Sorbonne, while sustaining 9,000 propositions. And he became bound in fast friendship with the handsome tattered Panurge.

All of this Pantagruel and Panurge did and saw, but in an uncleanly manner, while they spoke filthy oaths. So little of the chronicle was to the taste of the English, who like their fishes well-cleaned; save that once a lusty knight, called Sir Thomas Urquhart, did serve up the dish for the relish of strong palates.

Thus it came to pass that but the other day Messer John Dimitry, A.M., did serve up again (and not too cold) what is related above (and little else), but with certain preparations. First he took a feather duster and did dust off patiently the 15,000 ells that composed the garments of Gargantua. Then he took a large rubber hose and washed away to nowhere the foul words that streamed from the lips of Gargantua and Pantagruel. Then he did so entreat them that the Three Good Giants entered into the purifying waters of Helicon, where they did so lave their limbs that they came out Better Giants than ever before. Thus (as he tells us) Master John Dimitry did free these heroes from the bondage of the ideas of their time (for what are mere ideas, to constrain a giant?) and from the dishonorable captivity of foul speech and low gestures that have so long held them in dire duress. And now he who runs may read. And the Three Clean Giants shall bound along merrily with their schoolboy companions, while the sardonic Maistre François Rabelais rests quietly and unwittingly in his tomb near an aged tree that still flourished several centuries ago. But whether the tree be there now, I know not and cannot tell.

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The Letters and the Spirit

EXPRESSION IN AMERICA. By LUDWIG LEWISOHN. New York: Harper & Bros. 1932.

Reviewed by JOHN MACY

IN outward form Ludwig Lewisohn's book follows the course of American literature from its colonial beginnings to the present hour. The inward form which gives it essential unity is a passion for liberty of the spirit; this passion makes some of the writing incandescent and infuses fervor and vitality even into philosophic and psychological analysis which without the continuously burning fire would be static.

The monstrous enemy of the freedom of the American soul is Puritanism. Since in the chronological order of things Puritanism comes first, Lewisohn plunges at once into an attack on our Calvinistic forefathers; and throughout the book whenever anything that could possibly be called Puritan or neo-Puritan shows its head Lewisohn strikes at it. He would

The years of prose that interrupted and postponed the greater poet were devoted to civil and religious liberty in opposition to monarchy and ecclesiastical establishment. The very name of Milton should remind us that the Puritans were, for their time, fighting on our side. In England they were subject to the challenge and correction of other high types of thought. In America they had it all their own way for a time; as is the habit of rebels in power, they became tyrants themselves and were partially defeated not by a restoration but by a slow undermining.

Lewisohn rushes head-on against the Puritans as if they were living enemies. He even argues gratuitously with Thoreau in the first and second person. He quotes Thoreau: "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens as our higher nature slumbers." Lewisohn replies, just as if Thoreau were standing right over there:



ILLUSTRATION, BY FRANK C. PAPÉ, FOR THE COMPLETE WORKS OF RABELAIS (LIVERIGHT)

tighten his argument and clarify his generally beautiful exposition if he did not see Puritanism written over every kind of stupidity and intellectual and economic tyranny. All positive abominations and negative weaknesses Lewisohn groups indiscriminately, as if, Caligula-like, he would destroy them with one blow. He gathers together all our enemies, with Puritanism at the center: one-hundred-percent patriotism, the Eighteenth Amendment, reticences and hypocrisies concerning sex, the commercialization of fiction, the genteel tradition, Federalism, aristocracy, the horrors of the machine age, labor spies, flabby religiosity, Dreiser's hostile critics, lynching, chauvinism, the Ku Klux Klan, "know-nothing" hostility to foreigners, all things inimical to freedom of life and the expression of life. These vile things which we should all like to rid the world of forever cannot be thus conveniently assembled for our attack. They must be seen with discrimination and aimed at with sharp, discerning shots. To associate the old Puritans with prohibition is, to use Lewisohn's frequent word for whatever he does not agree with, nonsense. The New England Puritans, the respectable members of society, were drinkers. See Samuel Sewall's "Diary" *passim*.

Lewisohn regards all manifestations of Puritanism as pathological. Since he deals rather aggressively in medico-psychological terms in his treatment of all kinds of human failings, it is fair to ask whether he has not some sort of "psychosis" which may be called Puritanophobia. As a critic he lurches off his course when a whiff of Puritanism touches his nostrils. He can say:

The great writer . . . may begin, like Milton, by justifying a perishable and dusty theological system, he ends, as Milton did, by expressing the universal virile instinct in love, the universal Promethean protest with both its fire and pride and its deeply troubled conscience.

Milton began as a late Elizabethan lyricist.

Ah, no, good Puritan, we are not; you are. . . Who told you that the senses are ignoble? They are ignoble only when, as in yourself, they are abstracted and divided from the faculties of the mind and the soul. But in us they are not and never have been. . . Our purity is not one of abstinence but of fitting and beautiful use.

Lewisohn says that "Walden" is not a great and complete book because "unfortunately" it "contains a chapter called the Higher Laws which, in the accustomed Puritan way, blunts all the arrows, retracts all the brave and lofty sayings of the earlier and later chapters, and makes it necessary for Thoreau to be saved, as by fire, for our uses and the uses of posterity." Well, speaking as one Yankee about another, I guess Thoreau is not in need of a radical redeemer, but can be left just about as he is. And I think that Emerson does not require precisely the process of anthologizing, on just the narrow plan of selection and exclusion which Lewisohn proposes.

We who pretend to be historian-critics will meet the problem of the Puritan whenever we make any general survey of American thought. The best way to approach the problem is not to begin wrong, not to belabor the Puritans nor to endow them with too many virtues in the manner of the ancestor-worshipping professors of literature. Most of what the Puritans wrote is, from a literary point of view, a dreary bore, of interest chiefly to specialists in history. We need not argue for or against the Puritans. It is the business of the philosophic critic to understand them. It is necessary to comprehend the Salem witch trials not as an isolated insanity but as an episode in the history, many centuries long, of witchcraft in Western Europe. Lewisohn has much that is fine and wise to say of philosophic and analytic method, of the need of a fundamental metaphysics, of the ultimate serenity of all true art and criticism. He often exemplifies and demonstrates the high qualities that he pro-

claims, and his enthusiasms for lovely and noble ideas make his style glow and keep him from being a mere cold, judicial critic. His passion for lofty and liberating thoughts is magnificent; some of his particular hostilities are irritable and febrile.

Lewisohn has not enough humor in his system. He writes well of Mark Twain, of Mencken, of Ring Lardner, and is not quite deaf to the laughter of Holmes (though what he means by saying that Holmes's polish is "on tin" passes my understanding); but it is serious satire that he properly values, not fun. He puts Mencken with Juvenal and Dryden, a most inept association. Mencken is a boisterous clown, irrespressibly funny, and at his best is close to Mark Twain in his lower burlesque moments. Lewisohn overlooks Bret Harte's fun; he is unaware of the humor of Cabell, of Aldrich, whose "Marjorie Daw and Other People" he dismisses as "vapid stuff." He is unconscious of the humor, the quality that Mark Twain so well understood, which plays in and out and round about the work of Howells and is part of his gentle humanity.

One reason that Lewisohn fails to take pleasure in the quiet fun of Howells is that he is so intent on showing that Howells (and the society that he portrays) evaded and repressed the great motives of sex. Next to anti-Puritanism, sex is Lewisohn's leading theme. He is contending for liberty in all matters relating to sex, and especially for the open, honest expression of all aspects of the subject in literature. We are with him in his contempt for fundamentally obscene proprieties, for cowardice cloaked as virtue, for the hypocritical or unconsciously morbid concealment and eviration of the vital forces. But in our time the walls of restraint are down; we can say anything we like in a book; and the lingering resistance, represented by Mr. John S. Sumner and his kind, has not enough force or vigilance to take care of the hundreds of books that might offend the prudently pure. So that some of Lewisohn's animated bravery is thrown into a belated battle. It is much belated when he beats dogs long dead, as he does promptly in his first encounter with the Puritans. He has no time for John Eliot and he mentions Sewall's Diary only once, in evidence against Cotton Mather; Sewall is too human to fit Lewisohn's case against the Calvinists. But he has time for the querulous complaint of a self-evidently desirous old minister, Nathaniel Ward, against prettily dressed women, and makes him the forerunner of later pruderies.

In his treatment of sex, Lewisohn is equipped with the newest styles of psychology, psychopathology, psychiatry. The technique of psychoanalysis can be, in skilful hands, an instrument of precision to measure the mind. It can be a subtle ray, like the rays known to physicists but invisible to ordinary sight, to search the darkness of the soul. In the hands of an amateur it can be a confounding of confusions, an explanation needing explanation, like the work on theology which the Yankee deacon was reading and of which he observed that it was a good book and the Bible threw much light on it. If I were not certain of the tough integrity of Lewisohn's mind, the patient diligence of his scholarship, his luminous imagination, I might suspect him of making a display of what he has been reading in German works on psychology. The vocabulary of that kind of literature, which is sometimes no more than the substitution of technical words for common words, is thick in his pages, thick in multitudinousness, and too often thick in particular applications. As I cannot go immediately to the source, which he gives in a footnote, I am at a loss to know what he means by saying that Whitman's poem, "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now by the Hand," contains "a curious 'Liliputian' fantasy." The matter is still more muddled by the statement that this poem "throws some doubt on Whitman's robust aggressiveness even as a homosexual," when Lewisohn has said a few lines before that Whitman was "a

homosexual of the most pronounced and aggressive type." Whitman's homosexuality has not been these many years "an open secret" or any kind of secret. He yelled it from the housetops. There is something comic, like discovering that Columbus discovered America, in Lewisohn's bold resolution:

I purpose, then, in regard to Walt Whitman to sweep away once and for all the miasma that clouds and dims all discussion of his work. It is not true [and I almost resent Lewisohn's saying it] that Whitman "finds his prophets and proclaimers from decade to decade among the febrile and the effeminate."

Lewisohn omits to note that on the evidence of the poems, such as "A Woman Waits for Me," Whitman was both homosexual and heterosexual (the two things are often found actively together in the same person).

The light from Freud and his followers is immensely important and will, if properly directed, illuminate all future biog-



LUDWIG LEWISOHN.

raphy and criticism. It seems to me that Lewisohn's lights are confused, as when something goes wrong with the traffic signals. If it is "but sober truth that we owe Hawthorne's one thoroughly achieved book and unique masterpiece 'The Scarlet Letter' to his happy and harmonious union with Sophia Peabody," then how do we account for the inferiority of "The House of the Seven Gables," written one year later in the same state of domestic felicity? If Henry James threw out his elaborate style as a kind of smoke screen to hide his male deficiencies, why did he not do it in many of his clearly and simply written books composed in young manhood when he must have been as acutely aware or subconsciously defensive of his physical impotence? Melville, according to Lewisohn, had a mother fixation, and his life is a phobia and a psychosis. But it is not a less subtle seasickness of a landlubber that makes Lewisohn miss the glory of "Moby Dick" and renders him almost blind to Cooper's sea tales, which Balzac and Conrad, both great artists, and one expertly qualified to judge, greatly admired? Must we have in the middle of the section on Howells a quotation from Freud's "Totem and Taboo," which is now an old story and which, though it has some relevancy here, is rather laboriously intrusive? Dreiser has a mother fixation. Sherwood Anderson is "sex-obsessed," and the pattern of his psyche is similar in a different way to that of Cotton Mather and the Anti-Saloon Leaguer! Lewisohn apologizes for invading the privacy of a gifted contemporary and postpones further consideration of the sad case of Anderson by saying: "A seriously undertaken psychograph of Sherwood Anderson will some day add important elements to our knowledge of both art and life under neo-Puritanism." If such a study is to teach us anything, it must be undertaken by a critic who has a sound temperate view of the Puritans old and new, who is not vexed by a nervous, messianic, moralistic preoccupation with their sins.

I have used a disproportionate amount of space in negations and oppositions. The reader will please regard this as an unfinished article requiring two thousand words more of solid praise to redress the spatial balance. For this book is the work of a distinguished mind and a passionately honest heart enamored of beautiful things. It contains hundreds and hundreds of perfect phrases which I have delightedly underscored in my copy. Many sustained passages are wise and eloquent, so rich that they seem final and leave nothing more, certainly nothing better, for anybody to say. Criticism which is in any sense fully expressed, almost ultimate, is rare. Lewisohn's thought and phrasing are so mature that perhaps the young may be unable to follow him. Yet I wish that students approaching a systematic study of American literature might be guided to it not by the deadly handbooks but by this enlightening and refreshing survey of our life and letters. Most books that attempt to cover the whole of American literature lay stress on the past and finish off our contemporaries in a perfunctory way. Lewisohn, without overestimating us and our age, sees the past as a preparation for what we are and can become, and half the book deals with today or a very recent yesterday. American literature in all forms is now in the richest period that has so far been. And the future, as Lewisohn believes, is limitless.

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A Czarist's Russia

ONCE A GRAND DUKE. By the Grand Duke ALEXANDER of Russia. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1932. \$3.50.

THIS autobiography of the Czar's cousin, who in his latter years has devoted himself to the gospel of love, begins with chapters of real charm describing the childhood of two little grand dukes in a palace in the remote Caucasus. These chapters and those which follow describing the court and family life of the Romanoffs have some of the curious interest and intimate quality of the Grand Duchess Marie's "Education of a Princess," but are less detached and less detailed than her remarkable story. There is plenty of excitement and interest in his account of the intrigues and stupidities which preceded and accompanied the great war, the incredible misadventures on the Russian front, and the machinations at the Russian court throughout the war, where he was in charge of the Russian air service, and is said to have carried through an excellent feat of organization. But the Grand Duke, by his own statement, writes from memory, his papers having been lost in the Revolution, and this portion of the book, which is its chief claim upon the reader interested beyond family life, gossip, and scandals, is not only highly prejudiced but historically misleading, a remark which must also be made of his account of the Revolution. Whether his bitter condemnation of Kolchak and his accusations against the conduct of the Allies in the White-Red struggle succeeding the war can be believed, it is not so easy to say. Certainly his statements do not lack positiveness, or violence.

The book then, as a whole, must be ranked as interesting, but not as an authoritative account of Russia in the war and the Revolution. Even an ill-informed reader will be suspicious of the author's historicity, when he finds in crisis after crisis he is sure that he was right and all the others who acted, czars, grand dukes, generals, admirals, premiers, wrong. In short here is a philosophic mind that late in life has adopted a new philosophy of living, which in retailing the events of youth is sometimes charming, often interesting, but prejudiced and misleading in the remembered picture. Prejudiced books have their values, and regarded as the expression of a personality this autobiography will have some value but it cannot be recommended as history.

A Romantic Figure

DECATUR. By IRVIN ANTHONY. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1931. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

STEPHEN DECATUR, one of the most mysterious, ardent, and capable of the sea captains whose preternatural activity in the War of 1812 laid the foundation of the American naval tradition, is precisely the subject for a romantic biography of this type. Unfortunately, Mr. Anthony was not quite the man to write it—or perhaps he wrote it with a juvenile audience in view. For Decatur is, above all, a boys' hero, and it is difficult to describe the unquestioning patriotism ("My country—right or wrong") and somewhat stilted chivalry of 1812 in any other terms than those of juvenile enthusiasm.

For whatever reason, the artless delight in blood and thunder is present. It casts a curious air of the sickly-sweet over all sentiments. It obscures passages that a more sophisticated biographer would have been at pains to clear up—for instance, what was the secret behind Decatur's love affair and marriage? For on Mr. Anthony's own showing a more unmarried man never trod a quarter deck. It leads Mr. Anthony into flat self-contradiction for the sake of an emotion—when Decatur is engaged in building the *United States* she is one of the fastest frigates that ever sailed, and when he is her captain she is "Old Wagoner" and one of the slowest. (The latter is correct, by the way.) It permits him to make minor errors of fact for the sake of a phrase; sails were not trimmed flat in 1795, as he states; if the *Enterprise* was schooner-rigged, then Theodore Roosevelt was jesting when he described her as a brig; and if it was Daniel Frazier who received the sabrecut destined for Decatur's head at Tripoli, the U. S. Navy Department has been naming warships in honor of Reuben James for the last hundred years under a misapprehension.

Personalities move cloudily in this Cid-like atmosphere; even such marked characters as Barron and John Randolph of Roanoke fail to come out clearly, and the subject of the biography is a mystery to the end. But most of all his method does not allow Mr. Anthony to deal with the capital question of Decatur's career, and the one any biographer of him should answer—why he surrendered the *President*. Her keel had been damaged in getting over the bar at New York, she had suffered some injuries to her rigging, and four British ships were coming up. But the losses among his crew were small, he had beaten his most serious antagonist out of line, and in a similar case the *Constitution* had escaped without the loss of a man. Why, why, why did Stephen Decatur, with his reputation for last-ditch fighting, haul down the flag of a ship so slightly damaged that she began a cruise under the British flag immediately after being captured? True, the court martial acquitted Decatur, but they were trying him on a long and successful record and not on the specific case.

If the book be treated not so much as a biography of the central figure as a history of the period through which he strode in cocked hat and cutlass, a good many of the defects disappear and some quite unusual excellences emerge. The exigencies of the code duello, which pursued the commodore all his life and finally ended it in so futile and tragic a fashion, run through the narrative like a sombre thread in the tapestry of high ardors and austere patriotisms. The solemn stuffiness of the early congresses, the Oriental courts of the Barbary powers, the life of a captain on the Mediterranean station, are well described. In fact, wherever it is a question of atmosphere and not of events, Mr. Anthony is at home.

Too much at home. Just when events claim the center of the stage he gives us more atmosphere. The supreme moment of Decatur's life, his battle with the *Macedonian*, is a pastiche of atmosphere, and of atmosphere raided from the account of a British seaman who was present without credit, even in the bibliography. There is

no hint that Decatur handled his ship with remarkable intelligence and skill. The reader is left with the impression that he was a good administrator and skilful trainer of men—and a brainless, bull-headed, hammer-and-tongs fighter who depended upon his advance preparation to carry him through. Which is, if one can trust any other account at all, hardly a true picture of an officer whose most prominent characteristic was an icy sharpness of intellect in the stress of action.

"Cut Throat Bandits"

(Continued from page 581)

another escapes criticism. How many civilized people have bought radios in the last year to find that an hour or two on Saturday afternoon and the Philharmonic concert on Sunday is literally all they are worth! Not all—for an excellent item slips in now and then by seeming accident, but there are no critics to tell us that we have heard, or missed, a Eugene O'Neill, or an "Of Thee I Sing" or a "Green Pastures."

We hope that the investigation will be thorough, for some Congressmen are sure to be educated by it, and some useful criticism of critics may develop, though it will have to be barbed like an assegai to pierce the New York dramatic critic's skin. But that the theatre and the literary trade will profit by letting the great common people be their own critics, is just another delusion of democracy afflicted with elephantiasis. The supply of bad plays, bad books, bad films, is like the Catskill reservoirs. The critics are the faucets. The public is in the tubs. Do you want to drown them!

"It is not to be supposed," says a writer in the *Manchester Guardian*, "that any great proportion of T. S. Eliot's readers is equipped to work this complicated apparatus of allusion. Indeed, it might fairly be asked how, in an age not remarkable for learning, any influence could be claimed for a poet so portentously learned? The answer lies partly in the fact that among his derivative themes there is one—that of the English Renaissance—to which the present generation is fully prepared to respond."

A Balanced Ration for Week-End Reading

"THE SQUARE ROOT OF VALENTINE." By BERRY FLEMING. Norton.

A spirited and fanciful tale recounting the adventures of Valentine when he fared forth to see what New York was like at three-thirty in the morning.

EXPRESSION IN AMERICA. By LUDWIG LEWISOHN. Harpers.

A study of the evolution of the American spirit of liberty as expressed in its literature.

BACK YONDER. By WAYMAN HOGUE. Minton, Balch.

A chronicle of the Ozarks, depicting "survivals of an earlier conception of life."

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