The Saturday Review

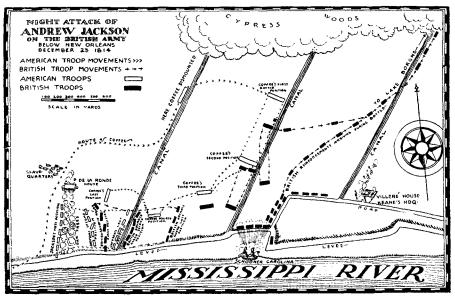
LITERATURE

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MAP OF NIGHT ATTACK BELOW NEW ORLEANS. From "Andrew Jackson, the Border Captain.

A Dragon Wallows Up

IBERALISM, not the dogma of a party nor a formula of economics, but the liberal spirit, tolerant, intelligent, magnanimous, hopeful, which this Review has stood by, and stands by, has never in our time been in greater danger than at this moment. The violence and persecutions of the Great War were the results of circumstance and against the policy of the majority of civilized men. The spirit of fear-and-hate, with the violence, the persecutions, the threats against world peace which accompany it, has now been adopted as a policy by men and nations who believe that liberalism has broken down, and demand that its opposite shall become a philosophy of action.

But liberalism has not broken down; it is only liberals that have failed. The distinction between an ideal and its application is important. That the liberal spirit of the last era was one of the great achievements of the human race (hard won and easily lost) will not be denied. That it was blindly optimistic, narrow in its application, unsound in its economic bases, romantic in its belief that we needs must love the highest when we see it, is equally true. The shock of the war destroyed a confidence not firmly grounded. Emphasis shifted from the successes of liberalism to its failures. There was a healthy reaction against optimism. The too sanguine humors of the world were quickly purged.

Reaction went further. Amidst the disillusions and the futilities of the post-war period, the liberal spirit itself began to seem a mockery. Sensitive spirits, like Feuchtwanger, bent on realism, rewrote of politics, analysts like Proust began to study the decay of culture, the English novelists described the end of an epoch. Significantly, a new brutality came into literature-in Europe a hard transcription of brutal experience, in America, with writers like Hemingway, a fascinated, a romantic, dallying with brutality itself. Realism changed from an impartial formula to a creed; to be realistic began to mean to doubt everything which the liberal mind had willed and hoped. The defeatism of the last weary years of the war became a philosophy. Since they could not have the confidence of pre-war, men and women began not to believe in confidence. And when confidence leaves, fear arrives. All over the western world we have had a literature of fear, sometimes intellectually courageous, sometimes, as

(Continued on next page)

Old Hickory

ANDREW JACKSON, THE BORDER CAPTAIN. By MARQUIS JAMES. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. 1933. \$3.75.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MACDONALD OMMENTING in an appendix of "Personal Acknowledgements" upon Parton's life of Jackson, and especially upon the fact that, in spite of its faults, "a man walks through" its numerous pages, Mr. James takes to task the American biographers who regard biography as "a sort of biproduct of history rather than the cellular life of the same." "The spotlight," he declares, "must ever be on the central character. Background must remain background and by selection and emphasis be kept from swamping the man we are trying to tell about." Mr. James may well have had even less difficulty in the present book than in his previous biography of Sam Houston in adhering to his plan, for while Jackson was peculiarly a product of the then southwestern frontier, he was himself such an outstanding figure that one would be hard put to it to write the history of the region without making his personality emerge; and in Mr. James's hands the emergence is both more vivid and more complete than any previous biographer has achieved.

The book is more than a piece of brilliant writing, however. Mr. James confesses to a fondness for working with manuscripts, and his research in the manuscript field, as well as in that of printed sources, has been thorough. He has, for example, examined nearly all the manuscripts which the late Professor Bassett used in his collection of Jackson's correspondence, besides using many others which Bassett omitted or condensed. In addition, he appears to have visited all the places in which Jackson lived, worked, speculated, quarrelled, and fought. The results of these two lines of inquiry show themselves in such diverse fields as a minute examination of the question of Jackson's birthplace and the circumstances of his marriage, and a masterly study of the locale of the New Orleans battle and the incidents of the battle

The main outlines of Jackson's career down to 1821, the point at which Mr. James stops (a second volume is to follow), have already been drawn, notably in the two volumes of Bassett's biography, but Mr. James, besides contributing a wealth of details and critical discussions, (Continued on page 511)

thinks a very large minority inside the faculties and departments of

English, and the literary public, which is touched more nearly than it knows by academic problems, should be concerned to listen to their case.

HE worst threat to the world's

critical standards comes just now

from the universities. So at least

Put briefly it is that the difference between a mind which can solemnly pen such empty platitudes as appear in many university publications on literature, and a mind that can see their absurdity is, spiritually, a life and death difference. And, secondly, that deadness of spirit is to some degree catching, so that to thrust, as we do, the mass of our young people into close contact with dead spirits through the most susceptible years of their "education" is a dangerous practice.

What has happened is explained by the working of the academic machine wherever strong hands are not laid upon it to prevent it from mastering us. There are universities both in America and in England-and I have been so fortunate as to have been associated only with these-where these dangers are recognized and, so far as may be, avoided. But they are more difficult to avoid than the non-academic critic may suppose. When a strong and alert hand is lacking the machine has things its own way. Its victims have to lecture whether they have anything to say or not. Before that they have to listen for years to such lectures. After all this listening—interspersed with hurried "examining of works" to the satisfaction of another, not very different, kind of Examiners-they gain the privilege of earning a small salary by giving such lectures. But the doors to this privilege can only be opened by compositions like those with which we are all familiar. As a rule the candidate has no special interest in the subject. It is chosen for him by a set of conditions which arise largely because what he is supposed to be doing is cruelly and falsely called research. As he is going in most cases to be a teacher, he ought to be qualifying himself to do as little harm as possibleto be as little deadening as he can-to those he is to teach. Instead, as he is researching, he has to pretend to be doing something new and useful-a feat of which he is incapable at this stage of his development. The exceptions to this are too few to matter. In an overwhelming majority of cases, the research period merely damages his chances of development, and afterwards he is likely to be too busy steering his would-be successors through the doors to do properly anything that he may later find to do.

This gloomy summary is a string of commonplaces inside the profession. No doubt all professions have their skeletons. "Every profession is a conspiracy against the laity." But the academic profession, in this regard, is in conspiracy against itself. It is indeed a piteous sight to see men ready at last to do good work fretting their energies away looking after men who are not yet, and in most cases never will be, able to do anything of value. But the conspiracy hurts the laity too, since it removes nearly all those who are best qualified by natural gifts and scholarship from their proper work

in maintaining and refining our critical standards. No one will deny that we need help in this; no one will maintain that we are getting it from the universities in anything like the measure in which, I think, we might reasonably expect it. For after all, the universities do get the pick of the world's brains. They keep a few; but use them in a way which cuts them off from their proper share in critical leadership, in the interests of an academic compromise with research.

Our Lost Leaders

By I. A. RICHARDS

It is a compromise because the young teacher is expected to research and the young researcher to teach. This sounds a reasonable requirement. There is a pretty theory which backs it to the effect that no one can be a good teacher who is not smitten himself with a sacred passion of curiosity. This appealing notion might have more relevance if teaching and researching in English were more like teaching and researching in other subjects, or if the research were more often motivated by an inner not an outer necessity. But teaching in English is unlike teaching in history, or mathematics, or languages, or science. Each of these is a discipline which a well-trained person can successfully display and transmit without a tithe of the strain that good teaching in English involves. Ready memory, sound learning, care in presentation, and a modicum of vivacity or impressiveness make a man an excellent teacher in any factual or logical subject. Something quite different is required in addition from a good teacher in English. He has to bring into the classroom and display there a fairly complete, well-balanced, and sensitive personality. For he has to speak about living matters which cannot be isolated—like specific heats, or clauses in the Bill of Rights-from the



FATE COMES UNSWERVING. By Mark Van Doren.

"THE PERSONAL MEMOIRS OF JOFFRE.

Reviewed by ROBERT G. ALBION. "LOOKING FORWARD"

Reviewed by ROYAL J. DAVIS. INDIVIDUALISM, AN AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE.

Reviewed by Gustavus Myers.

"THE UNITED STATES IN WORLD AFFAIRS "

Reviewed by S. K. RATCLIFFE.

"COLD COMFORT FARM." Reviewed by George Dangerfield. 'ACTING."

Reviewed by Lora Baxter. "LOSE WITH A SMILE." Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT. "MARIE ANTOINETTE."

Reviewed by MEADE MINNIGERODE. THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT." Reviewed by AMABEL WILLIAMS ELLIS.

Next Week, or Later

RECOLLECTIONS OF FRANK NOR By ERNEST C. PEIXOTTO.

context of our joint experience. If he reads or discusses a poem he will kill it for the class, and had better far have left it alone, unless he is, then and there, as discriminatingly aware of it as he can be. Mere enthusiasm and knowledge will not be enough—they can lead to the most fulsome and impertinent thrusting of the poetry on the pupils. What is required is the exercise of a critical sincerity in ease and freedom, which is something that no one can provide to order.

There is, it is true, in the teaching of literature, a part which is comparable to the teaching of other subjects-literary history, namely, who wrote what, when, and why: who influenced whom; who reacted against whom. This, with annotation, anecdote, remarks on prosody and oddments of philology will supply material for a great number of lectures. And in the past this has, on the whole, been what teachers of English literature have felt that they should supply. We forget, however, how recent the teaching of English literature is, and in this recency is to be found the explanation of the queerly unoriented position of the whole subject.

The place of literature in Western culture has shifted and is still shifting. Some familiarity with a few great books used to be the almost native endowment of all. Wide and varied reading was the accomplishment of the gentleman's class only. In those days courses in English literature were not needed. A man's parents and friends could provide what, for his position in life, he needed. Today all this is changed.

The public, as a whole, is being cut off more and more from any family or juvenile contacts with literature and the wide and varied reading which is our universal accomplishment is more likely to impoverish and imperil our minds than to enrich or support them. All this is well known and it is doubtless an awareness of it which has caused the demand for literature courses in schools and at the unimities. But the averages has not been

rsities. But the awareness has not been ne enough; we have not asked sharply nough what the demand is for and how hat it seeks may be given. At the moent we are in general choking it off rather than supplying it.

The demand, under many disguises, is for contact with and initiation into the ways of thinking and feeling, choosing and judging, which have been counted the best in the past. Literary history will not meet this. It has its place in the necessary equipment of the scholar-but Heaven forbid that we should all be scholars. The only general demand that it can meet is a discreditable one which looks to literary courses to provide an imitation culturethe kind of "culture" by which a man may escape the imputation of being "uneducated" even when he is so. Quite a different kind of English teaching is needed to meet the need for a proper inheritance of our genuine culture and traditions. The recognition of this fact that what used to be given by natural contacts must now be given artificially by teaching is forcing a slow and painful reform in the English schools.

The focus of the problem is the position of research. If a man is to teach in a way at all adequate to the importance of his duty, he needs leisure, in which to read, meditate, and refresh himself. He needs otection from distraction and most re search in English is the merest distraction without relevance to anything he is doing or (careerist considerations apart) the least urgency. Most researches are tasks that have been found, after painful research, in order to satisfy the system. In the present state of English studies the only researches that are worth doing are those that the worker feels so strongly about that he must work at them. Here again, as with teaching, a parallel with other subjects (scientific, for example) may be misleading. In physics there are plenty of pieces of work that any one of a hundred adequately trained persons ran do equally well. In English subjects art from the merest editing or compila--there is needed a peculiar marriage

man and the work. No other job

him and no other man will suit

is makes the organization of

cruel and profitless and ex-

plains why so few academic theses have any significance for anyone.

What matters most to our civilization is that as many as possible of those who are capable of discrimination and reflection should be encouraged to discriminate and reflect. Wordy and impassioned attempts to simplify the problems that arise for all curious minds are no substitute for such encouragement. They do not feed the curiosity, they damp or disgust it. Nor is indiscriminate laudation of poetry our need at the moment. What is needed is better training in reading, in making out, that is, whether what we are reading has anything in it of value or not. It is not what we have read but how we have read it that counts. Explanations of the importance of poetry (even good explanations) and insistence upon its importance are of no avail unless the exercise and discipline of the mind in the act of reading is height-

The equipment both of writers and readers is being provided by universities. From them, and from the schools, the literary public must take its standards of sensitiveness, acumen, and alertness in reading. It used not to be so; we used to derive our standards from great books and from an idiom in the mouths of our fellows that itself derived largely from great books. But the natural channels, the family and the privileged class, for example, have been broken down; cheap printing and now the radio-those two overwhelming extensions of our physical means of communication-have completed the inundation; and henceforth we all have to swim for ourselves in a verbal medium of mixed quality that it would be idle to comment on here. As fishes are built up of what is in the water so the systems we, rather possessively and individualistically, call "our minds" are made up for us by a selection from the verbal medium we live in. Doubtless in addition we have our human nature, our family constellations, our distinctive ego-id proportions, our pre-verbal unconscious. . . . But, as the poet and critic are most concerned with us, we are structures built up on this basis by assimilation and accretion from our verbal medium. And the poet and critic, too, are being of the same order. Where they differ from us it is largely because they have followed more rigorous principles of selection.

This way of describing the familiar situation confuses it, for some people, with a relatively minor problem of vocabulary. But the peril that the breakdown of cultural channels has exposed us to is not only a matter of impoverishment, corruption, or blurring of vocabulary—serious though it is. It threatens our values still more deeply. Nearly all our possibilities of experience today are offered us first in imagination through words. Even when this is not so, the experience is illuminated for us and placed in some perspective for us through words. We judge it, we choose to pursue it or to avoid it because of words. All our intellectual and most of our emotional discriminations keep their order and clarity through words. The whole abstract world of moral values is held for us by a framework of words. Still more important, our skill in sorting and manipulating these values in imagination is chiefly a skill with words. Our forms of thinking are verbal. Our modes and feeling, if they are not verbal, can at least only be examined and compared by means of words. A decline in our sensitiveness and discrimination with words must be followed soon by a decline in the quality of our living also.

These considerations together with the evidence (which is, I think, indisputable) of a rapid decline in verbal standards both as to speaking, writing, and reading-capacity among industrialized populations, puts a new and terrifying responsibility upon the literary critic. In the eighteenth century he was a gardener in a garden whose finest plants showed on the whole a strong tendency to overcome by themselves any weeds that might struggle to oust them. Today he is more in the position of a botanist called in to deal with an uncontrollable new growth of hybrids and migrants.

The real danger is seen most clearly if we consider the general capacity in reading, rather than speaking or writing. It is not hard to demonstrate that a majority even in a select company are not able to read sufficiently well for the study of any exacting literature to be of profit to them. A page of seventeenth century prose or verse and a request for an analytic paraphrase will disclose this fact. Phrases and constructions which were by no means too fine or too involved for the general reading public of Milton's time will badly strain the mental span of a modern class reading for Honors.

This would seem a paralyzing situation, if we did not know how unfamiliar any exacting reading is to modern readers or how little training in close attention to finely formed meanings they have had. Ordinary life gives no such training, and where shall we find today schoolmasters to do for us what Bowyer did for Coleridge and Lamb?

At the same time that we were studying the Greek tragic poets, he made us read Shakespeare and Milton as lessons; and they were lessons too, which required most time and trouble to bring up so as to escape his censure. I learnt from him that poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, wildest odes, had a logic of its own as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive, causes.

The situation would be more paralyzing also, if we did not realize how intricate and deep an exercise the careful reading of any page of good prose or verse is. And how supreme an opportunity the exercise of close and critical reading gives us. Here, if we can use it, is our resource against confusion. Here is our means of strengthening that inner power of ordered choice which is our only protection.

As he ponders over the contemporary situation the critic or the reviewer must feel, I fancy, an increasing uncertainty as to the value of his undertakings. He feels himself struggling to affirm certain values against odds. The more candid he is the less he will be sure, himself, of those values. Meanwhile the more carefully and honestly he tries to write just what, after reflection, he thinks, the more he will discover that most of his readers-even the sympathetic-misunderstand him. For every additional exactitude in his writing he will have to pay a price in misunderstanding. The only road down which he can be sure of being followed is an old, easy, well-worn highroad of cloudy vagueness. Encountering these conditions and tracing them to their sour recall that there is one branch of the lit-

erary critic's profession where he is entitled to take steps to see that he is not misunderstood; one sphere where his judgments and distinctions can be assured of proper attention. It is not impossible that a part of the solution of our difficulties might be supplied by a migration from the journalist reviewer's attic to the classroom. The obstacles-overwork in term time and more limited choice of company -are not so serious that endowments could not overcome them, if those who can endow realized the urgency of the matter. The great need for better readers, and the little need for any but superlatively good writers, must make friends of literature wish that our available critical talent could be concentrated where its savage virtue would be most effectivein the classroom or the tutor's study.

J. A. Richards, Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, has been one of the most stimulating and provocative influences in recent criticism. His "The Meaning of Meaning" (with C. K. Ogden), his "Principles of Literary Criticism," and particularly his "Practical Criticism" with its remarkable reports upon the teaching of poetry, have exercised wide influence. He was a visiting professor at Harvard in 1932. It has been unfortunately necessary to omit some of Mr. Richard's evidence for the conclusions in this essay, because of space limitations.

A Dragon Wallows Up

(Continued from preceding page) in the fiction of cruelty and disorder, distinctly hysterical.

A Matthew Arnold, a Tennyson, an Emerson, a Whitman are of little use in such a crisis. What could Whitman mean to a twenty-year-old Nazi, or Emerson to a convinced Communist? We have dropped from the spiritual level where such idealists can persuade the typical intellect; and it may be said with equal truth that their doctrine is too naive for a world economically and socially far more complex than theirs, and curdled with passions which the complacency of the nineteenth century kept under, in classes which had not yet sought their place in the sun.

What is needed today is a biting literature of social criticism, aware of the beast, the child, and the coward in every breast, yet unwilling to concede defeat or to accept error. We need a Voltaire. We need a "Candide," a book that Jew-baiters and war-mongers can understand. We need a lash for the failures of liberalism (as Voltaire lashed the failures of Christianity) by men who understand (as Voltaire understood) that the purposes of liberalism are indispensable. The stupidities of force and blind reaction can be fought only by intelligence, disillusioned but not discouraged. The lumbering naturalism of realistic fiction is quite inadequate, and so is the outmoded humanitarianism of the stage. A controlled and intelligent anger, destructive in order to construct, sharp as a knife and aware of its ends and its enemy, is the best weapon against this old dragon of intolerance, distrust, violence, and hate, wallowing up from the mud of history. You cannot kill dinosaurs with sermons or scientific analyses, or turn them back by oratory. Nor do whiffs of grape shot settle anything except for the moment, as Napoleon learned to his cost.

Sir W. Beach Thomas, writing in the London Observer in commemoration of he tercentenary of the death of the poet George Herbert, says: "He was a friend of kings, but also a king of friends; and though James I, patronized him, and, if he had lived, might have turned him into a useless courtier, and Charles I. read him in prison, his life is chiefly famous for his friendships and his family friendships. No friendship under record has more ideal qualities than John Donne's with Herbert's mother. . . . George Herbert was a saint from his youth up, but at one period the temptation to be a worldling was almost too strong for him, and he suffered from wracking struggles in spirit, as in body, to the very moment of his death. . . . We may conclude, with apologies to the cynics, that saintliness was in the tissue of his being. So was music, so was verse. And in spite of the glories of 'The Temple' and 'Private Ejaculations' his attributes may be set in that order of dominance, if not of merit."

Fate Comes Unswerving

By MARK VAN DOREN

ATE comes unswerving like a frightened horse Sky-maddened on a white mid-afternoon. Fate comes unseeing, and the blinded hooves Drum a shrill thunder to a noteless tune That dies into the forest, where an owl Returns it to the midnight and the moon.

Lean neither way, for nothing can escape. No walker in a field knows whence it comes. Only there is an instant when the dust Whirls upward and the round horizon hums. Then the feet loudest, and the final leap . . . With afterward no dream of any drums.