

## R. H. D.'s Best Story

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS: HIS DAY.  
By Fairfax Downey. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1933. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ON page two of this biography of a once enormously popular writer, Mr. Downey makes an excellent remark:

Richard Harding Davis was born with a silver pen in his mouth, the collaboration of a newspaperman and an author of fiction.

That is exact. He was also born with a fine physique and remarkable good looks. He was his friend's, Charles Dana Gibson's, model for the Gibson Man.

But—it seems strange to say, "in spite of this!"—and in spite of the fact that most of his literary work has retained no lasting quality (we would except such a short story as "The Derelict" and such a fine dog yarn as "The Bar Sinister") the half legendary "Dick" Davis remains a character of brilliant color in the history of American letters. He represents the popular writer at his best as a person. He had notable qualities of character, an unusually fine chivalrousness, he saw life gla-



A GIBSON DRAWING WITH DAVIS AS MODEL

morously, and he was usually having a gorgeous time of it. Such people greatly enhance the world, they lend it a cocktail tang. Davis wrote of life as he saw it, which, for all his realism, was chiefly through romantic and sentimental rose-tinted glasses. And he wrote in a healthy and manly fashion entirely natural to him. His best characteristic was his curiosity about events. He had to see them happening. Strange as it may seem, I still believe that the late Richard Harding Davis and the late John Reed had much in common as reporters and writers, despite the fact that Davis was usually conventional and Reed became entirely communistic. They had the same boyish enthusiasm, dash, delight in a good "scrap," vigorous appreciation of the picturesque. Both were entirely masculine, democratic, American. Davis was a stickler for etiquette, Reed quite the opposite—being a rebel—but both were of the best American breed, courageous, independent, cocky (if you like), but genuinely talented.

Davis, loving the British, was no snob about it, however. In the Boer War he made no bones about where his sympathies lay. He meted out criticism of the British when he thought it deserved, and he continued to regard Oom Paul's people as very similar to those embattled farmers who "fired the shot heard round the world." That was at one of Davis's many wars. In his last one, the Great War, he campaigned valiantly for Preparedness—but he also went to Plattsburg, training with men far younger than himself, exerting his aging physique beyond its strength, and he served bravely with the pressmen overseas, encountering considerable dangers.

Mr. Downey has given us a good chronicle of this admirable individual; admirable in many ways, purveyor of romance to the many, "broth of a boy" of the Gay Nineties, inseparable from one's picture of older Manhattan. He was distinctly of his period. In good looks, athleticism, talent, and love of adventure he became

the beau idéal of a whole generation of American boys and girls. He fitted almost too aptly the proportions of their dream. Just as Charles Dana Gibson made his beautiful wife, born Miss Langhorne, the lovely aspiration of thousands of romantic youngsters who followed the "Gibson Girl" through the pages of *Life*, so Richard Harding Davis, even had Gibson never drawn him, seemed the heaven-sent embodiment of American youth's ideal of manly beauty. Even the syllables of his name were just right. It almost seemed as though he had written himself and stepped directly out of the printed page!

Richard Harding Davis contributed genuinely to the people's entertainment in his time, and if the product he purveyed was not of enormous value, there was, at least, nothing cheap about it and nothing bogus or hypocritical in Davis's attitude toward the standards of conduct it upheld. Of no powerful intelligence, he was yet a clean-living and courageous man with a notable personality. And, even though he knew this fact full well, he succeeded in endowing that character with considerable charm. "Dick" Davis's was just about the best story he ever wrote!

## Old Friends Return

RETURN. By Michael Home. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1933. \$2.50.

HERE is a book which ought to be one of the season's big sellers; for it tells very skilfully the ragsto-riches fable that can hardly be bungled even by writers much less talented than Mr. Home. Not that Harry Francis ever attained riches; but, born the son of an English laborer, he rose to be a Bachelor of Arts, a schoolmaster, and a major in the war; the possessor of a comfortable income, and indistinguishable to all outward appearance from a gentleman. To some, possibly, this will seem an old-fashioned and sentimental tale; but it is made of the stuff of familiar human experience, and told as well as Mr. Home tells it, it ought to please the great majority, who will not object to its considerable length.

It is an arguable point whether Harry Francis or the countryside that produced him is the protagonist of the book. For the landscape of a certain part of Norfolk Mr. Home has that passionate love that so many English authors feel for their native scene—something different in kind as well as in degree from any American's sentiment for his home, something which perhaps you cannot feel until your ancestors have been buried in that soil for a couple of thousand years. The scene as well as the characters is an integral part of the production, yet you can hardly fail to like the characters, too. Besides the bright boy, hope and eventual mainstay of the family, you have the devoted and ambitious mother, making every sacrifice to realize in her son what she missed in herself; the genial and worthless father, continually dragging down his family financially and morally; the likable and shiftless brother, the sisters good and bad, the friends in higher spheres who gladly give the ambitious boy a hand up. All old friends, perhaps, but they are not types, Mr. Home manages to individualize them all.

It is a satisfying story, in an age when most stories, deliberately or unconsciously, are apt to leave their readers unsatisfied; and the satisfaction it gives is plausible and convincing. Yet—it would have been better still if Mr. Home could have refrained from occasional editorial intrusions. Not content with showing you the successful struggle of Margaret Francis and her son, he intervenes now and then to give them three cheers, whether the applause is deserved or not; though it can be said of him, as has been said of Tacitus, that as a faithful reporter he supplies the evidence for correction of his own editorial bias. Moreover, in the dealings of Harry and his mother with his father there is a touch of smugness which the author who sets it down does not seem to recognize. Charles Francis was certainly an ornery old reprobate; but you cannot help feeling that anybody who was not personally involved in his fortunes would find him better company than his virtuous wife or his successful son.

## Let My People Go!

KINGDOM COMING. By Roark Bradford. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1933. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

IN a magnificent advance from his high black vaudeville of Heaven and the Mississippi Valley, Roark Bradford has written the story of slave aspiration for freedom in one of the richest and truest historical novels that have ever come out of the South.

In a sense his book is a new handling in the earthy terms of the slave quarters of the old theme of man's quest for the islands of the blest and man's old experience in finding both his goal and futility at the same time. It is also, however, a living and true picture of life in the slave South and of the remote, exciting war which brought to the slaves a puzzling freedom, a freedom altogether different from the legend which slipped back along the dark route toward the North star.

Mr. Bradford's story is of Messenger, named after a race horse and a rider and driver of fine horses, and his son, Telegram, by Messenger out of Crimp. In these two men's lives, Mr. Bradford has written with a fine restraint the tragedy of two good black men in two generations in the South. White men sent Messenger to his tragedy, white men and his wife, Crimp, who could not keep her skirts down in the big house where the young gentlemen were. Crimp's yellow baby sent him seeking freedom and finding death in the false blind underground beneath the North star. Telegram's tragedy grew with freedom in the crowded concentration camps in a New Orleans occupied by Yankee soldiers, brown whores, negro refugees, and the dark and bloody cult of Voodoo.

In these two generations, Mr. Bradford has written the true story of slavery and the true story of freedom. Both are sad stories. Never heavily stressed, nor emotionally presented, his picture of slavery is both more convincing and more heart-rending than all the melodrama of propaganda in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Mr. Bradford understands the quality of horribly casual cruelty which Mrs. Stowe missed for the more obvious sting of Simon Legree's whip. He has caught, too, the bewilderment in freedom of the Negro and his deep disappointment which could never be appeased by the loudest promises of forty acres and a mule. Most important of all he understands the Negro's characteristic of suffering under ingrained discipline and defensive secrecy and of his single escape in flight or violence.

In his drawings of Messenger, Telegram, and old Aunt Free, who raised Telegram while his mother was occupied with the white overseer, Mr. Bradford shows a deeper understanding of the Negro than in any book he has ever written. Their humor is not lost nor the quaintness of their language but neither is there in their portrayal the least sign of straining for

an open laugh. The men and women in "Kingdom Coming" are not made for quick comedy but for fundamental reality. They are simple, ignorant, superstitious, and secretive, but deeply capable of suffering. In the terms of their own world they possess the qualities of dignity which makes their tragedy valid and moving.

Mr. Bradford in his earlier works was content to write Negro comedy without creating living characters who could suffer as well as strut and laugh. Now at last he has demonstrated that his knowledge of the Negro is not limited to his August religious meeting or his loud braggadocio and lurid love making, but that he understands as well the more secret workings of black men's hearts.

## Personality vs. Plot

ORDINARY FAMILIES. By E. Arnot Robertson. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1933. \$2.50.

THIS is the kind of novel which has been done so often and so well since introspection began to concern itself with the moods of youth. Its title is misleading. The Rushes were not ordinary people, and neither were their associates. It was only because the heroine, Lallie, thought that her ex-hero father (who loved to tell about it), and her instinctive mother (who lived in her children), and her extraordinarily seductive younger sister, and the rough and tumble lives they all led, mostly on boats about to capsize or be run over, were ordinary, when they obviously were not, that the story gets a psychological twist that might be called its theme. Actually, however, its merit is the merit of personality,—personalities done with humor and a convincing line. You can't keep a novel, even a poor novel, with this quality down—nothing else makes such interesting reading; and frankly this reviewer got far more pleasure from the portraits in action of this story, than from its not unsuccessful attempt to reveal a girl's subjectivity.

But novels of personality should not rely too much upon plot—as Jane Austen knew. A conventional one is best. This author comes to grief at the end of her book by switching her interest too rapidly toward what is really another story. When Lallie's mother finds her brood is hatched, that is really the climax. Lallie's own charming love affair might have rested then and there and no one would have asked for more. But its frustration after marriage, when the siren sister comes home again, is just either untrue, or a chapter of a new novel. It is much harder to end novels than to begin them. And yet this unsatisfactory ending is only a pendant to a book that makes a go of fancy, and creates real people and a credible and amusing environment. Give it B+ for nine-tenths of the way, and C, only for the last chapter.



ESCAPE OF SPIES FROM CANAAN

Woodcut by James L. Wells, shown at the Art Center Exposition of the work of Negro artists



## Diary of a Biographer

(Continued from first page)

formal "Life and Letters" of the Macaulay type which he scorned for himself yet needed incessantly to use, that he came into his own. Incidentally those who have drawn parallels between his work and that of Lytton Strachey, admired at many points by Bradford, may ponder on this passage: "One thing is glaringly patent, so patent that it is difficult to imagine that Mencken had even read the 'Victoria,' though I believe he reviewed it, and that is, for good or bad, Strachey's work and mine are totally different, so absurdly different that it is hard to see why it ever occurred to anyone to compare them:"—a passage which must have been overlooked when the back page of the "jacket" for this volume of Bradford's was prepared. Perhaps his formula was too consistent a formula. One day he declared of it: "It may be that I pride myself vainly even from the structural point of view. My effort may be elaborate, but it may be too elaborate . . . too schematized."

This formulated method of his was so definitely his own that readers of this book can hardly fail to find themselves regarding it as he might have looked upon an identical product of another hand. We have already seen how he related it to that question of the love of fame of which he so often made a study in others. We should see, moreover, on looking closely at its pages, that, whatever the untouched original may disclose regarding the diarist's relations with women as such, that relationship, fully discussed in his "Life and I," is hardly so much as suggested in the pages now printed. Nor is there more than an intimated background of domestic felicities, without the shadows that flesh is heir to. Nevertheless, like "Life and I," the Journal is found to lay frequent emphasis on the phases of Bradford's inner life which seemed to him most worthy of scrutiny because common to humanity and therefore of possible illumination to the lives of others. To certain of these phases let us, then, turn.

Two of the questions Bradford was wont to ask about a character he was studying had to do with his relations to art and nature. Of his own glowing response to the provocations of beauty in the world about him—the skies, the coursing seasons, storm, sunshine, and growing things—the Journal yields innumerable tokens. In the field of art there is little to indicate an interest in pictures, architecture, and other physical creations of man. The art of books in poetry, drama, fiction, biographic and autobiographic record was of paramount interest throughout his life. By its side as another, and perhaps the most sensitive, expression of the spirit behind artistic utterance, stood music, his constant solace and delight. From Bach and Beethoven at symphony concerts to Gilbert and Sullivan—even, in his earlier days, to "Fatinitza"—he found unending pleasure and stimulus in listening to good music. What is more, he mastered the piano sufficiently himself to feed his spirit at home by the adequate reading of the best compositions, with his wife when four hands were needed or with his own two.

After dinner with H. an exquisite suite of Bach. Oh, the delight, the restfulness, the tranquil, stern comfort of this Bach music, as I so often enlarge upon it. It is not the mere escape from the restless difficulty of life, of my life, which one gets from Haydn and Mozart. . . . I hardly know any poet or any painter to compare with him.

Here, indeed, is a touchstone from which, in another, he would have delighted to draw conclusions.

Another art that appealed to him was that of the theatre, and for a time in the early days of the movies, he looked eagerly, but in vain, for the development of the possibilities he recognized in the picture play. For a time also he seems to have been almost a "fan" in baseball, even as he followed the local school games of football, and attempted billiards himself—quicken in all these instances by the psychologic displays evoked by contests of skill. His picture of himself without reference to these interests would have been incomplete.

So, too, he must have felt that completeness demanded some recognition of his own interest in money. "When I was nineteen," he noted at fifty-five, "I wrote a furious tirade of contempt for money, which I know expressed my general attitude at the time. Alas, my attitude has changed sufficiently in that respect, but I do not know that I am proud of it."

Take another of his favorite topics of inquiry—a man's relations with his friends and with human beings in general. Bradford craved the society of congenial spirits, and realized how much it ought to contribute to his work as a "Naturalist of Souls." Where could he turn more hopefully for the study of human nature than to human beings? In theory there could be but one answer. In practice his complaint that "book friendships spoil me completely for the friendships of flesh and blood" kept repeating itself in a variety of forms. A single passage may be taken as typical:

May 10 [1926]. . . My attitude towards people perplexes me more and more. In the abstract they interest me more than anything else in the world, that is, in books. I have not only vast curiosity about them, but sympathy and tolerance and tenderness and I hope understanding. Yet when I am thrown into close contact with them, it produces not only weariness, but a teasing irritation, which seems to increase the more I am shut off with my own society, and the less I go among them. Their voices irritate me, their silence irritates me. The stories they tell so illimitably about themselves and their own doings irritate and bore me, yet these very stories are always full of little illuminating details, such as I look for in my psychographical research with such eager curiosity. The only possible explanation that I can see is the old one, which I have propounded so many times, that my irritation is really not with others, but with myself. If I could be invisible and simply watch and overhear, without the hideous intrusion of my own corporeal presence, I think society would be vastly more bearable; but I am always there, and always in the way, and I don't know what to do with myself.

The "hideous intrusion" of his own "corporeal presence" seemed indeed to play havoc with his sensitive nerves. In 1918 he records the self-reproaches with which he tortured himself after attending a monthly dinner of the Examiner Club or a meeting of the Trustees of the Boston Athenæum—the beloved library in which he first learned the pleasures of discursive reading, a place so dear to him that he once confided to his journal, "I should like to be buried in the Athenæum." Some chance remark of his own at one of these gatherings, something he wished unsaid, caused him to bear away "some little sting or barb which is hard to pluck out, and sticks and festers for twenty-four hours afterward or longer." Poor dear man! Having seen him again and again at each of these assemblages I can testify that he never said a word that could have rankled in any breast but his own, or could be recalled with anything but interest.

Bradford was indeed, and preëminently, a man of the written word—or, more accurately, the printed word, for his dealings with manuscript sources were scanty, and here are not mentioned at all. One knew that he was an all-devouring reader—the very nature of his books demanded this of him, and the books revealed it. Yet the extent of his reading, in his own and in a number of other languages, both ancient and modern, receives a sharp and surprising emphasis from his offhand noting, early in his uncompleted sixty-ninth year, that, in order "to get a little reading knowledge of some new language," he had taken up both Portuguese and modern Greek. More astonishing still are the several entries in his Journal describing the appalling systematization of his day, so ordered, to meet the conditions of his health and what he called his "chronomania," that every possible moment was made to count. Late in his life, after describing in detail the plan he was then pursuing, he wrote: "If it be thought that such a programme suits a machine, and not a human being, I can only say that on this skeleton I hang the wildest fury of excited, convulsive thought and imagination that can be conceived, which makes quite variety enough!" To grasp the scheme in anything like its fullness it is necessary to read one of Bradford's own relations of it—and not the most detailed:

September 11 [1897]. . . In the morning, then, I write till half-past ten or thereabouts. After that, I begin my morning reading with fifteen minutes of poetry, this according to a system which I have followed for years by successive months, first two days of Dante or Milton, then a Greek or Latin play or Homer, then a French or Spanish play, then from the twentieth to the twenty-fifth of the month either English or Latin poetry, then French poetry in alternate months and in the others German, Italian, or Spanish. The remainder of the morning I spend on the American work which prepares for my portraits. In the afternoon, after playing on the piano and doing such accounts or correspondence as may be necessary, if I am at home I read Latin if I have any time before going to work out-of-doors, then, after working and going down for the paper, I read Greek till supper. In the evening I begin first with a few pages of Shakespeare or some Elizabethan play, these all according to a system; then some pages of what I call the gossip of history—letters and diaries—all according to an elaborately prearranged system, which has become part of my life; then a few pages of the great critics, according to a system again. Then some reading in different languages for different portions of the month, then a half-hour of novel or play reading.

On only two forms of reading was he wont to turn his back. One of them is noted in connection with picking up a copy of the *New Republic* in 1921: "Amused at my spiritual attitude with regard to these advanced and radical publications. I shrink from them with absolute terror. . . . Now isn't that a state of mind for a would-be intelligent man to be proud of? . . . I am afraid to read radical books lest they should lead me perforce to radical conclusions and I should feel bound to sell all I have and give to the poor." He dreaded equally arguments in favor of Bolshevism and of the Catholic Church, and writes: "I should discuss and discuss and discuss, go over and over conclusions which I long ago arrived at as the best for me." The Bible, or, more specifically, the New Testament, was also on his *Index expurgatorius*. "I do not dare to read the New Testament," he wrote a few months after disposing of the more modern radicalism, "for fear of its awakening a storm of anxiety and self-reproach and doubt and dread of having taken the wrong path, of having been traitor to the plain and simple God." Perhaps no single fragment of Bradford's writing has been more frequently quoted than the final stanza of his "Exit God":

I sometimes wish that God were back  
In this dark world and wide;  
For though some virtues He might lack,  
He had His pleasant side.

The sense of light dismissal which these lines convey is utterly belied in the Journal. In his "portraits" the study of a man's relations with God was often an ultimate, and baffling, inquiry. In studying himself the question repeats itself again and again. In 1919 he exclaims:

Who will tell me something of God? I know nothing about him whatever. It is a mere name, a mere word to me, yet it clings. Why? Mere association brought down from my childhood and thousands of others? Clouds and dreams and reveries, hopes and wonderings and fears? Or is there something deep and mysterious there that really takes hold of my soul? I cannot tell. But still the word clings to me, sometimes in the form of an oath, sometimes in that of an invocation or appeal, but still clings, and it seems to me that it grows.

There is hardly a topic on which his Journal touches, and repeatedly, with more intensity of feeling. It is not to be accounted for solely by his revulsion from overdoses of New England theology on the bleak Sundays of his boyhood. Something inherent in himself kept the question alive. The final issues of life and death confronted him perpetually, in studying himself as well as others. "Here lies one who asked too much of life" was his English rendering of the Latin epitaph he chose for himself. There was indeed no direction in which he asked too little.

In an essay on "Biography and the Human Heart" Bradford made the claim for biography that "it teaches us to understand the lives and motives of others, and nothing is more helpful to us in living our own." In this spiritual autobiography—for it is no more a record of external facts than any of his "portraits"—he has dealt, fearlessly and undoubting, with his own doubts and fears. He spares no record of his devastating paucity of physical and nervous strength, and in the face of it his monumental body of work, augmented by the daily "stint" of which this volume is but the partial fruit, his achievement represents an altogether extraordinary product of courage of the three-o'clock-in-the-morning variety. An ardent, brave, lovable figure emerges from it all—an embodiment of rare possibilities of interest and stimulus to others. Through the study of himself it may well be that he



M. A. DE WOLFE HOWE  
Photograph by Bachrach

has realized his own conception of the uses of biography more fully than in all his studies of others.

The admirable Preface with which Mr. Van Wyck Brooks introduces the volume to its readers provides in brief measure all they will need to know concerning the background and personal circumstances from which the Journal proceeded. Incidentally he informs us that he is bringing forth only about one-seventh of the total Journal—some 200,000 words out of an entire 1,400,000! None but the editor himself can know what has been omitted. What has been used plainly represents a judicious and satisfying choice. The book, moreover, has been provided with an excellent, ample index which is bound to be prized by the many who will want to return to the volume after their first perusal of it.

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