

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY



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### First Modern Soldier

**THE BLACK EAGLE:** *Bertrand du Guesclin, Sword of France.* By M. Coryn. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co. 1934. \$2.75.

**BERTRAND OF BRITTANY.** By Roger Vercel. Translated by Marion Saunders. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1934. \$3.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

THE history of the Hundred Years War is a drama of alternating fortunes in four acts: Act I, the successful English invasion, Cressy and Poitiers, France nearly conquered; Act II, the revived French monarchy under Charles V takes the offensive and drives the English almost out of France; Act III, the madness of Charles VI, Agincourt, and half France in English hands; Act IV, Joan of Arc, the national revival, and the final expulsion of the English. In the first revival of French fortunes (Act II) Bertrand du Guesclin played a leading role. In him the unwarlike Charles V found a captain who knew how to check and beat the English and win back the lost towns and castles; a leader whose victories restored the shaken confidence and captured the imagination of the people.

Du Guesclin emerges into the light of history as a hard-bitten leader of Breton irregulars who had won local successes in his own province and risen to be Count of Longueville and Marshal of Normandy. He won a battle for the crown and was chosen to lead the disorderly free companies, those bandit mercenaries who were bleeding France to death, out of the kingdom into Spain. Taken prisoner there by the Black Prince, he was ransomed, returned to Spain, and helped to establish Henry of Trastamare, thereafter to be a valuable ally of France, on the throne of Castile. Though Guesclin was not of the higher nobility, Charles V took the bold step of making him Constable of France. He amply justified his sovereign's confidence. He did not risk great battles. He relied not on cumbersome feudal levies but on small, mobile bodies of disciplined professional soldiers. He wore down the English armies, cutting off detachments and convoys, making his enemies expend their strength in futile marches; he was a master of guerilla warfare and of rapid movements and sudden combinations, like Stonewall Jackson or Lawrence of Arabia; he exercised that watchful economy of effort which is the mark of military genius.

The Bertrand du Guesclin of history is a curiously modern figure for the fourteenth century. He hung the Frenchmen in the garrisons he captured but treated the English as prisoners of war, thus giving the word traitor its modern meaning and making that distinction which is the beginning of modern patriotism. He understood the value of support from the non-combatant populations, did his best to prevent plundering, and insisted that his troops should be well supplied and promptly paid. He was an able organizer and recruiting officer and skilful at raising money. He took more towns by diplomacy than by force and never tried to out-fight an opponent when he could achieve the same result by out-marching and out-guessing him. In short, war to him was not a game, as it was to his chivalric contemporaries, but a stern, serious business. But it was not a business to be pursued, as the mercenary captains of the day pursued it, for personal profit and

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HAROLD NICOLSON AND FOUR OF HIS SUBJECTS

Byron, upper left, from the Romney portrait; Tennyson, upper right, painted by Watts; below, Arthur Nicolson ("Portrait of a Diplomatist") and Lord Curzon (Illustrated London News). Photograph of Mr. Nicolson, center, by Keystone View Co.

### How I Write Biography

BY HAROLD NICOLSON

This article is one of a series to which Mr. Tomlinson's recent essay on the novel also belongs. The editors have requested other distinguished writers to analyze their own purposes and discuss the rules and sources of their own art. Each essay will be a personal contribution to criticism.

I HAVE been invited by the *Saturday Review* to describe my personal experience of biography. I have been asked, more specifically, to divulge those influences which determined my choice of subject, sources, and material; to explain the methods by which I worked; and to discuss how the ensuing book corresponded to my own view of history and to my general philosophy of life. It was suggested at the same time that I should take one particular book as an illustration of my argument. What was required was not an article upon the general principles of biography so much as a confession of my own practice and experience in that ungentle art. I shall respond to that invitation as obediently as I can.

My first difficulty is that my biographical work has been of different kinds. I confess, indeed, that I have never written a "pure" biography, in the sense that I have never written the life of an individual conceived solely as a work of art. I have thus written studies of Verlaine, Tennyson, and Swinburne which, although they contained much biographical material, were in fact attempts at literary criticism. My "Byron the Last Journey," although more strictly biographical than the three books above mentioned, dealt only with the last twelve months of the poet's lifetime. "Some People" was an experiment in the most impure form of biography, namely, that of biographical fiction. And in my other books, such as "Portrait of a Diplomatist" and my more recent "Curzon: the Last Phase," my aim has been, not merely to paint the portrait of an individual, but also to record more than half a century of diplomatic history.

The above explanation, egoistic though

it may seem, is essential to what follows. One day I hope to write a "pure" biography and to concentrate upon describing the life and character of an individual from every angle and with no purpose other than such a description. As yet, however, I have never written a "pure" biography and am therefore but an ill-bred specimen of the biographer. It is with full consciousness of my mongrel origin that I write these confessions.

What, to begin with, really is biography? It is the history of the life of an individual written as a branch of literature. As a history, it must be true. In that it describes an individual, it must be personal. And in that it is a branch of literature, it must be written with due regard to construction, balance, and style. The purely literary aspect is a question of personal temperament and taste. The problems of "truth" and "personality" are, however, the first two problems that the biographer has to face. As problems, they are far more difficult than they seem.

A biographer, for instance, is obliged, if he has any artistic conscience, to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Is he also obliged to tell the whole truth? It is obviously impossible for one person to tell the whole truth about another person, even if they have been intimately acquainted for several years. This particular problem does not, however, present itself to the biographer in its general aspect; it presents itself in the form of a concrete instance. In my researches, for instance, into the last year of Byron's life I came across certain documents which threw a wholly new light, not only upon Byron's character, but even upon the problem of

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### The Narrow House of Victorian England

**BREATHE UPON THESE SLAIN.** By Evelyn Scott. New York: Harrison Smith & Robert Haas. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HORACE GREGORY

WITH each succeeding novel, it becomes more and more apparent that Mrs. Scott uncovers a number of uneasy problems for the critic and reviewer. Unlike her peers—and here I would include Mrs. Wharton and Willa Cather—she has arrived at no final destination; she eludes those categories that we are so fond of making for the novelist, those neat distinctions by which we separate the writing of a novel from other activities in literature. I would say that from the very start of her career Mrs. Scott has been interested in something far beyond the formal limitations of her medium, and one might add that her growth in mastery over that medium is almost incidental. She has, I think, proved her ability as an artist in all varieties of the form that she has chosen: among her shorter pieces are those admirable novellettes in "Ideals," and not content with these she turned to the larger canvases of "The Wave" and "The Calendar of Sin." Falling between the novelettes and the longer studies are her first book "The Narrow House," "Escapade," "Migrations," "Eva Gay," and the present novel, "Breathe Upon These Slain." I believe that this last is among the best of the dozen books that she has written, and listing a few facts about it will reveal, I think, its less obvious relationship to all the others.

In this last book there is a noticeable shift in environment; the scene is laid on the East coast of England and the central action of the novel is motivated by a series of events which took place forty years ago. The story is told by means of a special device: the narrator is living in a furnished house, and guided by family photographs hanging on the wall, reconstructs the history of the Courtneys who had made the house their home. It was one of those middle-class English families that wheeled slowly upward from moderate prosperity

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### This Week

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- EXILE'S RETURN  
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## How I Write Biography

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his separation and departure from England. To have divulged this information would have created a sensation and have destroyed for many romantic people the picture they had formed of Byron's character. I decided that I should make no use of this material except in so far as it colored and confirmed my own estimate of Byron's strangely complicated temperament. I think I was right in so doing, and I should justify my action upon the following biographical principle, listed under the heading of "Truth and the Whole Truth." My principle is as follows: "If a biographer discovers material which is so sensational and shocking that it will disturb, not only the average reader, but the whole proportions of his own work, then he is justified in suppressing the actual facts. He is not justified, however, in suppressing the conclusions which he himself draws from those facts, and he must alter his portrait so that it conforms to those facts." That is what I did in my treatment of Byron. Should some future researcher come upon that same material he will recognize from my book that I also was in possession of that material, that it colored my interpretation of Byron's temperament, but that I suppressed the material itself for perfectly legitimate reasons.

The problem of "personality" again, while it is akin to the problem of "the whole truth," takes devious forms. A biographer, if he is to achieve a coherent portrait, is obliged to select certain qualities or defects in his subject to which he gives especial emphasis. If he be an honest biographer he will be scrupulously careful to secure that this selection, or emphasis, is no distortion of the original. Yet not always will he find it easy to decide. A problem of this nature assailed me in my recent study of Lord Curzon which will shortly be published in the United States. Curzon was notoriously selfish in money matters, and there were occasions when he behaved, in matters of personal dignity, in a manner unworthy of a gentleman. I was perplexed as to how to show this element in his character. Knowing him intimately, I was aware that it represented only one of his many eccentricities. Yet I was also aware that those who had not known him intimately would see the whole picture in a false proportion. I thus merely alluded to his marked acquisitive instincts and gave no illustrations of the extent to which those instincts were manifested in his daily life. Here again I claim that I was justified. It was not that I desired to whitewash Curzon; it was merely that I knew that this eccentric failing would upset the proportions of my portrait and thereby convey an actually false impression. In principle, it is a mistake to suppress any weaknesses in one's subject. But in practice the honest biographer will find that the cause of truth is better served by the suppression of details which are disconcerting to the reader and which would falsify the ultimate impression left upon his mind.

I have begun my confessions with these two problems of truth and personality since they form a necessary introduction to the first item in the examination set me, namely, "choice of subject." In many cases, of course, the subject of a biography is imposed by adventitious circumstances. I was induced to write a biography of my father, published in the United States under the title of "Portrait of a Diplomatist," by obvious external considerations. When I had completed the book I was urged by friends to continue the thread of diplomatic history which it contained, and this led naturally to the second and third volumes of my trilogy on diplomatic history, namely, "Peacemaking" and "Curzon: the Last Phase." In these three books, therefore, I did not, technically, "choose my subject." My study of Swinburne, also, was suggested to me from outside, and it may be for that reason that it is the worst book I have ever written. In regard to Verlaine, Tennyson, and Byron I did, however, "choose my subject," and I ought to be able to describe the motives which prompted this selection.

I remember well the genesis of my book on Verlaine, which was the first book I ever wrote. The Paris Peace Conference

was drawing to its close, and one afternoon I walked back with Michael Sadler from the Quai d'Orsay. "I suppose," I said to him, "that it will all be rather flat when this is over. I have got so used to being overworked. What shall I do with the leisure which will follow?" "You must write a book," he answered. The idea struck me as highly original. It happened that on the few occasions when I had managed to get away from the work of the Conference I had amused myself by visiting the sites which Verlaine had frequented, having for years been fascinated by the life and poetry of that eccentric genius. Inevitably the name of Verlaine suggested itself to me, and from that moment I began to accumulate more detailed material. Tennyson, in his turn, was suggested to me, mainly by the fact that I had always appreciated his poetry, but also by my irritation at finding that so few of my contemporaries had ever tried to read or understand the work of the greatest of our English Laureates. My aim was, as I stated, to "cut out the dead wood" from the dusty mass of the Tennysonian laurel clump, and to draw attention to his lyrical genius and to the true nature of his character. To Byron I was attracted, not only by personal sympathy, not merely by my own love of Greece, but also by the fact that the centenary of his death was rapidly approaching. Such, in so far as I can judge, were the motives which propelled me.

Yet if one is to say anything useful about this "choice of subject," mention must be made, not merely of the subjects chosen, but above all of those rejected. For several months, for instance, I accumulated material and wasted heavy hours in a desire to write a biography of Pope. I abandoned the project since I found, as I came to know Pope more intimately, that he was, as a character, profoundly distasteful to me. There were but few points of sympathetic contact. On another occasion I started upon a biography of Anselm. Here again I abandoned the attempt, yet on this occasion it was not incompatibility of temper that deterred me, but lack of adequate knowledge. I realized that my ignorance of scholasticism rendered it impossible for me to write a life of any eleventh century Archbishop. A similar lack of topical knowledge prevented me from embarking recently upon a life of Benjamin Jowett, a man with whom I had many contacts but not that essential one with the religious temperament of 1858.

What, therefore, has all this to do with choice of subject, with "truth" and "personality"? It has this to do. The biographer may decide on his subject either from personal predilection or owing to external circumstances. He will at once be brought up against the problems of "the whole truth" and "unpleasant sides of personality." Should he feel personally hostile, or unsympathetic, to his subject he will not resolve these problems in terms of a work of art. The distaste which he feels for his subject may not cause him to violate the canons of truth and personality, but it will certainly induce him to violate the canons of art. He will incline, that is, to prefer the sensational to the integral. My rule, therefore, upon this vital question of choice of subject is "Never write a biography about anyone whom you personally dislike or from whose mental and topical atmosphere you are sundered either by prejudice or lack of knowledge."

Having chosen a congenial subject, the next step is one of study or research. It is a question of method. My own method is invariable. First, I buy an enormous notebook strongly bound. Secondly, I obtain from the library, or purchase for myself, the most comprehensive textbook upon my subject which I can find. I then number the pages of my notebook and prepare an index at the beginning. I then take the dates of birth and death of my hero and write out a table at the end showing exactly what age he had reached in any given year. Having done this, I start to summarize my textbook. The first page will be headed "heredity," the third "parents and childhood," the fifth "school and early influences," and so on throughout the man's career. On page 50 or so of the notebook will start the sections on character, which in their turn will be carefully indexed. Thus, page 50 might be headed "epileptic tendency," page 51 "ambition," page 53 "selfishness," page 55 "sense of humor, lack of," and so on. All entries from the main textbook must be made in black ink: the right hand page is folded in half, leaving the left hand page a blank. By the time the main textbook has been annotated in this manner, the majority of the right hand pages will be filled if not with material, then at least with headings. The temptation to shirk these notes by taking them in the form of references must strongly be resisted. It is a mistake, for instance, to write on page 73 of one's notebook "for good story about his drinking see Havelock Vol II page 353." Conversely, it

is also a mistake to omit references which may be required later. The Havelock story must be summarized in your notebook and the salient passages quoted in inverted commas. At the end of the passage must appear the reference "Havelock, Vol II, page 353." Only by such industrious methods can the material be properly digested, since, when, at a later stage, you begin actually to write the book, a mere reference will convey nothing to you, whereas to have to look up that reference a second time is a duplication of labor. Your main notebook must contain all the undigested material of the final work: it must not contain mere references to pages in other books.

Having read the main textbook, you must then purchase or acquire all the other books on the subject. According as you read these, you must insert the passages you may require to use on the right hand page of your notebook. If you have folded that page in half you will be able to insert the additional information exactly opposite the relevant passage from the main textbook. Having read all the published works upon your subject you then enter a further stage—that of original research.

If you are writing a biography of someone long dead this will be a delightful and impersonal labor. But if you are dealing with a man whose friends and relations are still alive you will be involved in difficulties. On the one hand is the desire to obtain hitherto unpublished material. On the other hand there is the conflict which will arise between "personal obligation" and truth. Let me define what I mean by "personal obligation." When writing my book on Tennyson, for instance, I was offered the opportunity of obtaining from Tennyson's son many unpublished papers. Knowing the religious veneration which the second Lord Tennyson retained for the memory of his father I rejected this opportunity. I was aware, in the second place, that were I to accept such material I should be placing myself under a "personal obligation" to the family of the deceased and would in common decency be precluded from saying anything which might cause them pain. I solemnly warn the intending biographer against this common danger of his profession.

Another danger of research in the biography of the recently dead is the unreliability of human evidence. Much of one's information must of necessity be derived from oral evidence. Such evidence is often confidential and seldom trustworthy. When the book is published, other people write to the press accusing you of inaccuracy. Your only reply is to quote your authorities, who all too often refuse to be quoted. All oral evidence, even when it comes from your subject himself, must if possible be checked by reference to others.

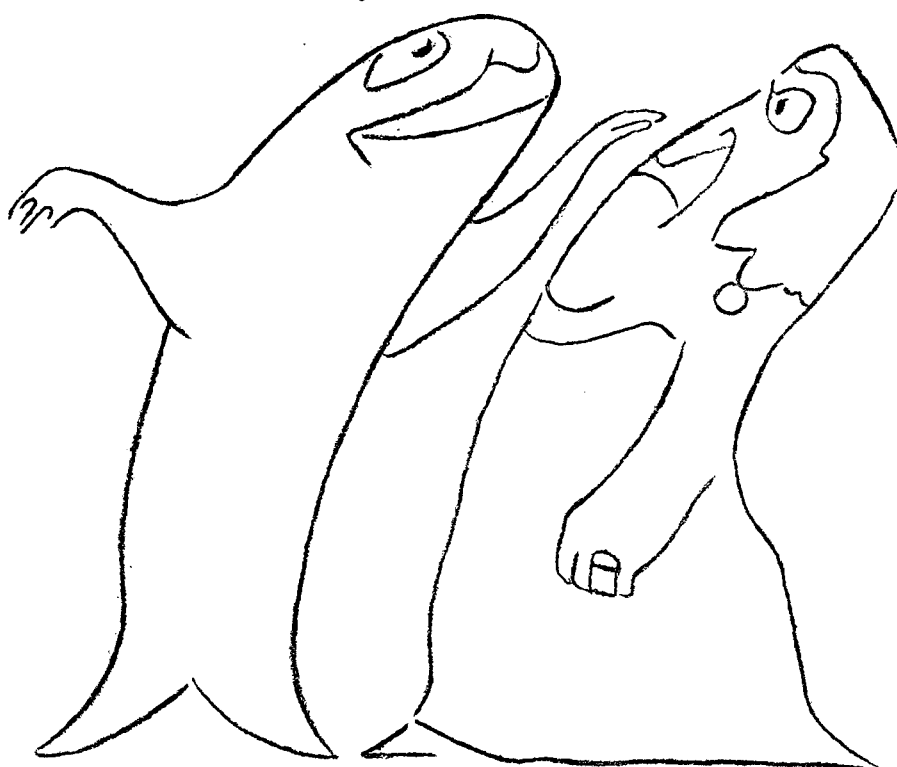
Having completed your notebook, having read all published books and gathered all available evidence, the next thing to do is to take a short holiday. That holiday must be spent in visiting the localities identified with the subject of your biography. This delightful pilgrimage must always be deferred until the last moment. Only after you have amassed all possible information is it profitable to visit the scene of your drama. Any premature visit leads to subsequent regret. If you have journeyed prematurely from Cleveland to Aberdeen, it is irksome, on returning to Ohio, to come across a book which gives you a whole new aspect of the Aberdeen period. No biography should ever be written unless the author has personally visited the places he describes; yet no biographer should visit these places until he has read and digested all possible material. His journey should be the breathing-space between the period of research and the period of writing.

On his return from this pilgrimage the biographer should settle down to his book. His first act will be to reread his notebook (which by that date should be a bulging portmanteau containing endless loose leaves inserted in their proper place and secured by a huge external band) and to block out the headings of his several chapters. He then starts to write—and from that moment I have no further advice to give him.

Such have been the methods which I

## A Friendly Soul

By CLARENCE DAY



**H**E'S a friendly soul and he longs to please;  
His sins, he is sure, are venial;  
And he's trying to put her quite at her ease  
By being extremely genial.  
She does seem cold,  
But he means no harm.  
His jokes are old  
But his heart is warm.  
So he clacks his tongue and he racks his brain,  
And her sniffs and snubs are all in vain.