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News Reel of the Past

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT. By Robert Bernays. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1934. \$3.

Reviewed by HELEN HILL

THE form of this book is succinctly stated in the first lines of the author's preface: "Special Correspondent" is not an autobiography. Still less is it a history of the last three tremendous years. . . . What I have tried to do is to convert my experiences and impressions into a cinema reel of contemporary events."

Mr. Bernays's decision to give his material such a form is regrettable, for its contents merit better treatment. When the pages take a personal turn, on the one hand, and when the chronicle is accompanied by critical comment, on the other, his narrative springs into life. But when Mr. Bernays retires behind the crank of his projector and becomes merely an operator returning a reel of the past, the impression given is like that of the morgue of a news reel company or a collection of old newspaper headlines.

Judged by the material it contains rather than by its general form, however, the book has two kinds of interest—it is interesting when considered as either of the two types of writing which its author says it is not.

The publisher's blurb is for once not exaggerating when it says that Mr. Bernays has the uncanny faculty of the born newspaper man for being in the right place at the right time. The events of Middle-Europe are the events which are setting the tempo of the Western world these days, and Mr. Bernays has hardly missed one of the personalities and occurrences which have rung the recent changes in Germany and Austria.

The current history which forms the substance of the special correspondent's dispatches takes on a further significance when the book is regarded as biography. Mr. Bernays's trip around the world was the equivalent of the old grand tour of the young Englishman about to enter political life. But it was undertaken, not as part of a normal preparation for public service but because political division to left and right had reduced the young candidate's party to a fragment, and because the world depression of which that division was in part a symbol had forced the consolidation of London's two Liberal papers with a resultant cut of thirty per cent in staff. The world tour, 1930, was an alternative to unemployment at home, a gamble that feature articles from afar would pay their way.

Such was the harsh background of this prelude to politics of a young M.P. who, one gathers, still reddens rather easily in spite of the poise induced by the Presidency of the Oxford Union. The two adjacent sketches of Australia, "Gate-Crashing the Governor-General," which describes luncheon at the races with the wrong dignitary, and "House Full," which describes the Australia infelix found in the bush by boy immigrants from dead English towns, outline the contrast between contemporary England and England of before-the-war which is implicit in chapter after chapter of the book. The contrast is between life according to the old forms, and life for which the old forms are empty, with the young man's apprenticeship in the first continually interrupted by the necessities of the second.

Undoubtedly the most interesting of the sketches are those in which Mr. Bernays openly recognizes this contrast, and discusses it so far as Parliament is concerned. He is peculiarly qualified to speak on this question, since he is one of the post-war generation who "believes in the old-fashioned nineteenth century creed of peace and freedom" while realizing "how dangerously these ideals are challenged today and how disastrous it is to human happiness when the challenge is successful." His impressions as a new member picture the great men in the Parliamentary game, growing older now, and separated by the gap of the lost generation from the "second eleven" under thirty-five whom Mr. Bernays would like to see put in. He sees the flicker of the Reichstag fire on the windows of the Mother of Parliaments. But he does not believe the fire will catch.

After reading his last pages, one turns again to Mr. Bernays's account, early in the book, of his first meeting with a Nazi student:

The only decoration on the walls was an immense map of Germany, with the lost territories marked in red. The mantel piece contained one photograph, that of Adolf Hitler. . . . He asked me what I

thought of his room, and how it would compare with that of an Oxford student. A little embarrassed, I replied, "I like it. It represents many of the qualities I admire in your nation—its simplicity and its hardness. Of course in Oxford the average undergraduate's room, if I may say so, would be more comfortable than this. . . . Quite likely there would be flowers on the table. There would certainly be books. You have not any books, have you? There would be pictures on the walls—" "Yes," he interrupted. "Pictures of actresses, I suppose. You English are soft."

I was so taken aback by this outburst that I did not answer for a moment, and he was silent. Then I said, "I think that is the most terrible remark I have heard since the war, for it tells me that history is repeating itself—and it hardly bears contemplation of what the result will be."

A Friend in Need

THE CONCISE OXFORD FRENCH DICTIONARY. Compiled by Abel Chevalley and Marguerite Chevalley. New York: Oxford University Press. 1934. \$3.

Reviewed by ALBERT FEUILLERAT

THIS new French Dictionary does not attempt to solve any linguistic problem; it does not even purport to be historical in the presentation of the chronological development of meaning. The aim of the compilers has been simply to offer translations bringing out as closely as possible the equivalence between French and English words—translations which are not only accurate but also concise, avoiding periphrases whenever one word is enough to express the meaning, and nicely differentiating the various uses.

In this hunt for precise translations the compilers have not been satisfied with simply exact renderings. They believe that "the value of an English translation lies in the similarity of its impact on the English mind with the impact of the original on the French mind." Hence their effort to discover in all cases the most colorful expression. Take, for instance, the phrase: "Chacun fait comme il l'entend." "Everybody does as he thinks proper" is a fairly good translation, but it does not convey all the shades of meaning in the French phrase. For this reason "Every one according to his lights" is to be preferred, for, besides having a proverbial ring, like the original, it takes into account the fact that *entend* also means *comprend*, and that the French expression does not imply so much morality or will as enlightenment. These are no doubt niceties, but it is such niceties that give a translation its flavor and its freshness, and in this case they certainly are one of the most striking qualities of this dictionary.

"The Concise Oxford French Dictionary" is presented by the publishers as being a companion to the "Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English," and this defines pretty well the scope of the work. Old technical terms, whenever they are of small use, and simply curious archaisms are omitted. But the greatest care has been taken in collecting words that record recent inventions of science or industry, such as terms relating to motoring, aviation, etc.; in adding to the vocabulary of trade, modern psychiatry, housekeeping, dressing, gastronomy, etc.; in including familiar and slangy words. The last-mentioned section of the vocabulary will be particularly appreciated by readers of the works of writers such as Carco or Céline, for they know by experience how insufficient a knowledge of classical or literary French can be when one is confronted by the linguistic audacities of certain modern French authors. Another useful novelty in this dictionary is the "danger signals" which call the attention of translators to what has been felicitously termed "false friends," that is to say those words that sound or spell alike in English and in French, which indeed meant the same thing at one time but have so much diverged in the course of their development that they now have widely different meanings (e.g. *dérider* = to cheer up and *to deride* = to mock). Lastly, the pronunciation of each word is indicated according to the system adopted by the *Association Internationale de Phonétique* which is so simple that it can be mastered by only looking at the keys at the bottom of each page.

The Oxford Press is to be thanked for bringing out this handy volume, including in little more than 900 pages as many as 40,000 words. It will be most helpful both to students and translators.

Albert Feuillerat is Sterling professor of French at Yale University.

The PHOENIX NEST

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ROUND ABOUT PARNASSUS

THE most intellectual poetry of the day blends with the metaphysical; and what do we mean when we say metaphysical? The Oxford dictionary gives such definitions as "abstract general reasoning," "incorporeal," "visionary," etc. When we think of the workings of the intellect, on the other hand, we are apt to think of reasoning as logical, something of scientific accuracy—though I doubt if reason has ever been so. All subjective or self-involved poetry is different from this, being in a sense metaphysical or visionary. It is not exact, like demonstrations in mathematics—though the higher mathematics that deals with things imagined to be so, may also be said to be metaphysical, for surely that is "abstract general reasoning." Genevieve Taggard, in her anthology, "Circumference," an anthology of metaphysical poetry, included the most diverse exhibits under that term.

Then, also, we find some poets dealing only with what the world conceives to be actual fact, exposition from which all trace of the visionary, they hope, has been extracted. This is not in accord with the principle significant in the writings of the Irish bishop Berkeley, that "no object exists apart from mind. Mind is, therefore, prior both in thought and in existence, if for the moment we assume the popular distinction." Berkeley's universe was pervaded and regulated by mind—"a living active mind is looked upon as the centre and spring of the universe, and this is the essence of the Berkeleyan metaphysics." And this is what I understand to be meant by the metaphysical in poetry, though the principle may be expressed diversely. Berkeley's attacks on the infinitesimal calculus and upon the higher mathematics are beyond me to understand, even as are they, save that I understand that the Bishop demonstrated his own ignorance in a good many ways. But today one of the most interesting of the younger American poets, Elder Olson, in his "To Man" and his "Essay in Deity," from his book of poems, "Thing of Sorrow" (Macmillan), sets metaphysics before us again:

Yet since he everywhere,
In water, land, and air,
Move as everything—
The gull on stony wing,
The sliding rock, the fish
In the sea's dim mesh—
Then, minute breast of bone,
Behold how all unknown
You drew him home as breath
In crystal lapse and flood.
Heart that refuses God,
You bear him for your blood;
Obdurate mouth, he is
The food that fed your hunger.
Deny him then no longer;
You took him for your bread.
Behold how unaware
In breathing the wild air,
In seeing, being fed,
In knowing even now
These words, this mist and snow,
These birds at the earth's rim,
Whether you will or no,
You have accepted him.

That to me is the kind of assertion that distinguishes the metaphysical poet from the poet who prides himself upon being purely intellectual. And the property of the metaphysical poet is rhythm, the pulse of things, whether it be the dance of electrons in the apparently passive stone, the movement of planetary systems, or the beating of the human heart; whereas the modern intellectual poet has almost entirely lost or discarded rhythm.

Elder Olson's book is important; and yet it is likely to be overlooked in the presence of work by other young poets of the day. It is important to me because of its metaphysical properties and because of the distinguished beauty of its writing. Indeed, Mr. Olson writes with so rare a distinction, albeit he has no great range as yet, that he awakens new hope for American poetry. There are some strong young men coming on. Paul Engle has had his extraordinary wave of appreciation; Kimball Flaccus, whose work I am not reviewing today, is of great promise; but Elder Olson is far more the mature artist than either, though his vitality seems to be lower than that of the others. It seems to be, yet is it? He is clear, he is immediate,

yet the subtlety of his mind is apparent. The shape of his phrase is hard to alter, his epithet is excellent, he is more truly interior than either one of the others, and may go farther.

THE WESTWARD STAR

From the entirely subjective I turn to an entirely objective book. Frank Ernest Hill, poet, editor, anthologist, analyzer of the American spirit, has now written a novel in verse which, while not perhaps distinguished for the quality of its poetry, is well executed for the kind of thing it attempts. Its title is "The Westward Star" (John Day). The particular irregular rhyme-scheme Mr. Hill has adopted, and flexible metre, both contribute to the direct forcibleness of his narrative, although I think that the irregularity of the rhyming occasionally causes an interruption in reading when the ear anticipates the rhyme and the eye searches for it. This may be hypercriticism, and applicable only to those with a special interest in the technique of verse, who are apt to examine such a medium for narrative with particular concentration. I should say that, for most readers, the story will probably flow along without this impediment. It is a story well told, and the long trek of the covered wagons across our early West is well described in detail.

Mr. Hill has obviously engaged in considerable research for this work. We know from his introductory note that certain letters and diaries furnished him originally with valuable first-hand material. But properly to use such material in creative work bespeaks an especial gift, and we have far too few examples in modern American poetry either of the proper use of indigenous material or of the narrative art. Mr. Hill has the gift of the true storyteller, and he also fully appreciates the epic background of the period of American history that he has chosen. He appreciates it without being sentimental about it. His object is to show in his long poem the true nature of the pioneer and, among other things, the variety of types of people who crossed the plains. He attempts to be factual rather than romantic.

The love story of the book involves people well-portrayed in a setting well-described. The entire naturalness of the dialogue is hardly ever sacrificed to the exigencies of verse. We get to know Celeste and her mother and Emmet Walker as well as one does the characters in any good novel. Mr. Hill has delved into their personalities and moves through their environment with thorough understanding and the ability vividly to visualize for the reader the daily life of those who travelled Westward in covered wagons. He also possesses a sense of structure and a sense of drama.

The book merits quotation to indicate the manner of its verse narrative. First consider this unusually good description:

The cone of dark above the land
Was crumbling over a rising surge of light;
In the gray air darkness and day hung blended.
Misshapen earth groped through the shattered night,
Took massive shapes in Emmet Walker's sight:
The silent, far-extended
Arc of the Platte,
Dim water under mist wool-white, etc. etc.

The increasing hardships of the trail, the almost incredible obstacles that arose, the enmities engendered, the struggling on of depleted caravans, the crossing of barrier mountains, finally the terrible resistance of the snow and cold—all these things are graphically set forth, and the love story, amid all this incident, grows steadily to its climax and attains a pitch of great poignancy. Nevertheless, I feel that the latter part of the book becomes somewhat monotonous and droning. The verse is throughout well-knit, but its power of variation is limited.

I do not think that this is our great Western epic, but I think that epic may come to consist of many parts, by many hands, and that perhaps this may be one part, one piece of the whole. In any event, it is good to see a few of our poets turning away from parasitism on European culture, and from various kinds of literary snobbery, and honestly attempting to deal with large historic things.

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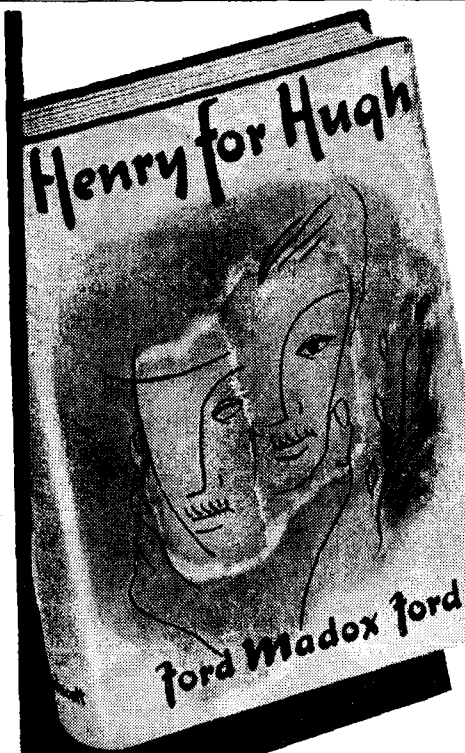
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