

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

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Writing American History

LAST year when *The Saturday Review* refused to admire a certain history of the United States, the editor received about a hundred letters asking which one-volume history he would recommend, and the question continues to come into the office about once a week. The editor has always listed three books: Morison and Commager, "The Growth of the American Republic"; Charles and Mary Beard, "The Rise of American Civilization"; and James Truslow Adams, "The Epic of America." He has always laid most stress on the first, explaining that he had to fudge a little to classify the Beards' book as a one-volume work, that it was besides too often content with exclusively economic explanations and did not always fuse its other material, and that Mr. Adams's book was too sweeping in its generalizations. But from now on he is not going to recommend a one-volume history at all. "The Growth of the American Republic" has appeared in a revised, enlarged, two-volume edition, and it is the best short general history of the United States ever published.

It is a very distinguished book. Obviously Mr. Morison was mainly responsible for the first volume, which ends with the death of Lincoln, and Mr. Commager mainly responsible for the second; but just as obviously they have achieved a single point of view throughout. The collaboration is immensely learned; it covers the entire field of source material and monographs so thoroughly that the reader has complete confidence in every judgment expressed. The judgments are liberal, judicious, decisive, scrupulously qualified where qualification is necessary, rigorously honest, and always responsible. The prose is crisp, vigorous, and lively: the book is the most literary of short histories. This is the kind of history we set up as a standard last year; this is the way American history should be written.

The authors have not only brought the narrative down to date in their revision;

they have rewritten the whole text in order to facilitate the reader's focussing the facts and findings of American history on contemporary problems. They have stressed the continuities in the American past and have thereby performed a notable service for all of us. Those continuities, whose existence is the most important fact in our history, are practically never mentioned in the debates that go on round us today. The editor would like to require everyone who wants to say anything about the American present, or the American future, to read Morison and Commager before saying it.

Books and Cameras

In three years "U. S. Camera" has become the best of the photographic annuals, in succession to "Das Deutsche Lichtbild," which slumped when it began to feature the swastika (probably by command). The 1937 volume is the best of the three. Again it demonstrates that American photographers are as good as any in the world—and that the best gravure reproduction is not good enough to transfer the full photographic content from the print to the plate. Again it is best in its representational, reportorial, and editorial exhibits, and worst when it sanctions arty nonsense. Again Dr. Agha wittily denounces photographic buncombe, and again the editors fumble when they ignore his thesis.

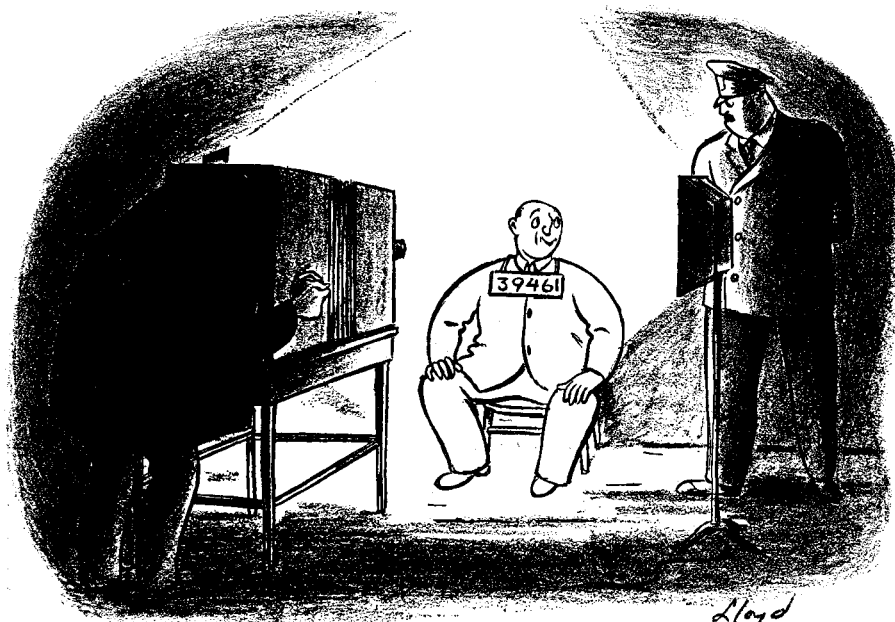
They avoid the quaintness, the postcard prettiness, that is presented as the "art" of photography by most annuals, but they accept stuff just as bad. The nudes are very arty indeed—and stupefyingly futile. No nude in the book is any more remarkable than a first-year student's charcoal sketch in a life class, and few photographic nudes can ever be. But the commonest artiness is camera rhetoric: at least twenty percent of the book wallows in it. For example take the

portrait of Edward Steichen in a doctor's gown with one arm upraised like a Druid priest or Aimee MacPherson, shot from two inches above the floor and hoked up by underexposure and overprinting. It sums up all that is wrong with self-conscious, verbalized photography. It is not only phony: it is vulgar.

As a mechanical process, photography is the best way of fixing the instantaneous appearance of things. As a process of representation in monochrome, it is the best way of preserving tone relations as they actually exist, and the best way of representing textures. As a visual process, it is the best way of extending the perceptions of the human eye. An intelligent esthetics can be based on those unique attributes. Such an esthetics makes the Cosmic Ray photographs on page 208 far better art than an oratorical picture of a lighthouse taken through a red filter, and any straightforward portrait better than the fake histrionism shown in such portraits as that of Mr. Steichen.

A mature camera art based on such an esthetics may be seen in Miss Bourke-White's photographs of Negroes and sharecroppers in "You Have Seen Their Faces." They rudely show up camera rhetoric for what it is, a contemporary substitute among the vaguely artistic for pyrography and decalcomania.

Pseudo At the end of the opposite page we print an anonymous letter—rather, a disingenuously pseudonymous one. We publish it merely as an example of a kind we were referring to some time ago. It has all the attributes of the type. It is based on what is either a stupid misunderstanding of the editorials it objects to or a deliberate misrepresentation of them. We cannot understand why anyone thinks that his notions can matter to anyone else unless he accepts responsibility for them.



"SAVE ME ONE FOR MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY"

Letters to the Editor: *Writing for Money; The Federal Theater*

Subscribing under Difficulties

SIR:—I live a simple life by preference. I prefer to work in the somewhat cramped space of an automobile house trailer where I can hear the howl of a coyote at night and avoid the rumble of traffic by day. Therefore, the subscription to a magazine has always necessitated two or three remailings, and since I spend my winters in the desert and my summers in the mountains, I haven't run across many newsstands which carry your publication.

A friend sent me "Writing for Money," by Bernard DeVoto, in your October 9th issue. A magazine which publishes stuff like this is a magazine I can't get along without, regardless of trouble or expense. So please enter me for a year's subscription.

In case you're interested, I have never read an article which had a more happy combination of clarity of thought and expression.

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER.

Redwood City, Cal.

"Bread and Circuses"

SIR:—It is unfortunate that "Bread and Circuses" should be the first book to appear on the WPA Federal Theater, but it is doubly unfortunate that such a lengthy and earnest review as appeared in your issue of October 23rd should contain so many confusions in critical judgment. For either Miss Whitman or Mr. Eustis to give a complete and judiciously fair account of the project is expecting, perhaps, too much, since neither apparently is thoroughly acquainted with the Federal Theater. The history of that, critical or otherwise, remains to be written; and though it will have to be unofficial it must be done by someone who has worked with the project from the inside.

"Ninety per cent of them were poor" says Mr. Eustis of the Federal Theater plays. Ninety per cent of the plays done on Broadway are not only poor but artistic failures, Mr. Eustis, including the hits and Pulitzer Prize winners.

"To Hallie Flanagan must go the credit," etc. Get away from the heroic concept of the theater, Mr. Eustis (and Miss Whitman). The Federal Theater is the first collective theater on a mass scale ever attempted in America. Many of the Federal Theater successes in New York City (both artistic and with the public) were done against the "better judgment" of the national and regional directors. The role played by the managing producers and their staffs in New York City in selecting plays, fighting for their necessary autonomy and theatrical authority, and in finally putting the project on its feet, would make an absorbing book in itself. In New York City, many important phases of organization and policy, until very recently, were not given to the project from above but were forced on the administration from below.

"It has developed no great actors, playwrights, directors, designers, or technicians."

The Federal Theater is only two years old. What "great actors, playwrights, directors, designers, or technicians" has the commercial theater developed in the last two years? No organization, no matter under what conditions or whose auspices, can "develop" a playwright, a designer, a director, in that time.

VIRGIL GEDDES.

Washington, D. C.

Congratulations to Mr. Eustis

SIR:—My thanks to you for the space you gave Morton Eustis for his review of Willson Whitman's "Bread and Circuses" and my congratulations to Mr. Eustis upon the thoughtful and informative manner in which he filled it. After reading Mr. Eustis's article and Miss Whitman's book I can only say that I wish the Oxford Press had entrusted the problems of the Federal Theater to Mr. Eustis.

JOHN MASON BROWN.

New York City.

(Mr. Brown is dramatic critic of the New York Post.—Ed.)

Tyranny of Language

SIR:—Your editorial criticizing Stuart Chase's article in *Harper's* on "The Tyranny of Language" is a fine example of the brilliant sword-play in which you delight; but possibly some of your readers may feel a craving for a simpler and homelier judgment. The chief purport of your comment, they can hardly fail to see, is that Mr. Chase is pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp; "there are horrid intimations," you say, that he thinks the problem of emancipating the human mind from its confusions is "simply to give words exact and verifiable meanings," after which "everything is going to be pretty lovely." I think you are entirely right; and it occurs to me that an extremely simple instance of the haziness of Mr. Chase's thought on the subject may serve to reinforce the point:

Failure of mental communication is painfully in evidence nearly everywhere we choose to look. Pick up any magazine or newspaper, and you will find many of the articles devoted to sound and fury from politicians, editors, leaders of industry, and diplomats. You will find the text of the advertising sections devoted almost solidly to a skillful attempt to make words mean something different to the reader from what the facts warrant.

That advertisers try to make readers believe something different from what the facts warrant will hardly be news to anybody; but to regard this as simply a matter of the meaning of words is a fatuous notion. When Mr. Chase cites it as a "painful evidence" of the "failure of mental communication," the reader who has been suspecting that the whole article is a mare's nest is greatly strengthened in his suspicion.

FABIAN FRANKLIN.

New York City.

William Falkner

SIR:—The note which appears on page twenty-one of last Saturday's issue refers to the spelling of William Falkner's name in "I Hear America," by Vernon Loggins, as a misspelling.

On page 110 of that book, Dr. Loggins has a rather interesting comment which explains it: "The world knows him as William Faulkner, but recently he ordered the *u* in his surname dropped, etc."

Would you be willing to make it clear that this was *not* an error?

ROBERT L. CROWELL.

Thomas Y. Crowell Co.,
New York City.

(We are glad to print Mr. Crowell's letter in justice to Dr. Loggins; but Mr. Faulkner's publishers, Random House, know nothing of this reported change in spelling.—Ed.)

School Reading Plans

SIR:—A part of the work of the Book Supply Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English is to investigate the means whereby reading materials have been made available for an adequate reading program in those schools where the necessary resources for such a program are ordinarily lacking. Many teachers have solved the problem of providing books through their own ingenuity and resourcefulness. A compendium of the various methods employed should constitute a valuable chapter of the Committee's report.

If any of your readers have been successful in promoting any plan for providing books and other materials for their classes, I shall be glad to receive a complete description of such a plan.

RUTH C. SCHOONOVER.

Negaunee High School,
Negaunee, Mich.

Independence

SIR:—Since no one else does the obvious, I suggest that in accord with the recent editorial declaration of independence, all teaching of the English language be suppressed; that anyone above the mental grade of school-teachers be forbidden to write it and anyone less illiterate than broadcasters be forbidden to talk it; that ability to spell be rated in all courts as proof of anti-totalitarianism and the traitor liquidated, and that any grammatical construction assaying more than one tenth of one per cent logical be punished by cancellation of moron-superiority cards, with all privileges. Also I believe it might be well to establish a standard of pronunciation of all ordinary words. Then anyone found guilty of conforming to it could be sentenced to the highest measure of social defense. Might be hard on you and I—so different than we are accustomed to, but one must sacrifice themselves to the public good.

CROCUS PRAECOX.

Atascadero, Calif.