

# Contagious Tastes

WOOLLCOTT'S SECOND READER.

Edited by Alexander Woollcott. New York: The Viking Press. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by GEORGE STEVENS

ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT'S tastes in reading are a matter of considerable interest, because he has an unrivaled ability to make other people want to read the books he likes. His tastes might be summed up by saying that he likes acid and he likes molasses, and you never know which you are going to get. A good part of his first "Reader," published a year ago, was fished up out of the treacle well: "A Doctor of the Old School," "My Little Boy," "Margaret Ogilvie;" even Evelyn Waugh's "A Handful of Dust" is curdled treacle. The "Second Reader," however, is entirely chosen by Mr. Woollcott's better self. Everything in it is good; much is first rate; and Mr. Woollcott's own comments are succinct and amusing.

Over ninety percent of "Woollcott's Second Reader" is fiction. Whether it is in Somerset Maugham's "Cakes and Ale," in Dorothy Parker's sketches, in Stephen Crane's "Whilomville Stories," or in Anne Parrish's "All Kneeling," you will find lean, acidulous, well characterized narrative, chosen for entertainment value. And entertainment value on this level

stands the test of time. Perhaps you have read "Cakes and Ale"? Read it again, and see if you can find an English novel published this fall that will stack up against it. The chances are that you have read Kenneth Grahame's "Golden Age," but missed "Whilomville Stories"—and you'll enjoy these if you enjoyed "Penrod." Even in the non-fiction the chief element is narrative: in Frederick A. Pottle's "Boswell and the Girl from Botany Bay," an excellent report of literary detective work; in William Bolitho's analysis of George Joseph Smith, the bathtub murderer; and in Gustav Eckstein's "Joe," the story of a Portuguese gardener. It is impossible to mention all the contents; the book includes Clarence Day's "God and My Father," and good short selections by Hemingway, Stevenson, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and various others.

It may be objected that there are two cases of near-duplication. Both "Cakes and Ale" and "All Kneeling" are novels about pretentious literary people; both "Whilomville Stories" and "The Golden Age" are minor classics about realistic children. But all four of them were good books when they came out, and are still good; the objection is unimportant. "Woollcott's Second Reader" certainly wins this year's omnibus race, and the publishers have designed its thousand-odd pages to be easy on the reader's eyes and arms.

## Some of New York

IMPERIAL CITY. By Elmer Rice. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

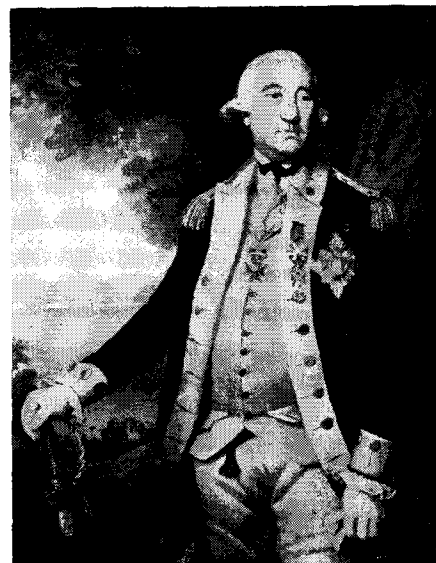
MR. RICE'S "Imperial City" is, of course, New York, and his is the latest attempt to get all of this complex and multitudinous town within the covers of a book. I think it would be possible to argue at length that the project is over-ambitious, increasingly so as the city grows. The fault of books that try to encompass the whole of New York is that they miss, because they must, too many of the parts.

Mr. Rice's story is strongly centered upon the fortunes of one family, a large family, it is true, and one whose particular characteristics provide Mr. Rice with a great deal of latitude for covering the city. For the three sons who carry forward the Coleman history are so diverse in character—Christopher, the financier, Greg, the playboy, and Gay, the college professor—as to create three separate spheres



ELMER RICE

of action to begin with. Added to these are a diversity of minor characters, sharply outlined, and an inexhaustible fertility of plot that keeps everything moving and humming at city pace. There is the illusion, if not the reality, of a large and seething scene, until we notice that the scene is being preëmpted by the Colemans; that they are really more alike than they are different; that they and their glib, hard crowd, wherever found, are a very special group of people with too much money or too much cleverness. Their stresses and strains are undoubtedly fascinating and Mr. Rice has made a long and vivid tale out of them. But there is too little of the other kinds of people, who do get a brief walk-on but hardly any more. Too often the book seems all Park Avenue, foot-lights, political campaign, courtroom. Why can't we have a full, novelistic treatment of people less dramatic? How about the less articulate middle class—the office workers, the music teachers, the men of good will? They live here too.



VON STEUBEN: Portrait by Ralph Earle, collection of William Randolph Hearst.

## Soldier of Fortune

GENERAL VON STEUBEN. By John McAuley Palmer. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1937. \$4.

Reviewed by FRED A. SHANNON

MOST persons acquainted with General Palmer's sketch of Steuben in the "Dictionary of American Biography" will welcome this full-length elaboration of the earlier effort. The book is chiefly valuable for its forthright obliteration of hoary myths concerning the hero's ancestry and career in Germany and a careful appraisal of the soldier's contribution toward the success of American arms in the War for Independence. Steuben is pictured as a "systematic, circumstantial, and deliberate liar" so far as his accounts of his own life are concerned, but always scrupulously truthful in his official military writings. His mendacity seems to have been inherited from his father, who invented the "Baron von" part of the name, thus fixing nobility on an otherwise peasant family. He was further abetted by a veritable "syndicate of prevarication" in France, headed by Benjamin Franklin who foisted a Prussian captain, fourteen years since cashiered from the army, upon the Continental Congress as an active lieutenant general in the service of Frederick the Great.

Here was a wonderful opportunity to write a muckraking, debunking, key-hole biography. But the author eschewed the role, justifying the deception practised on the American people as a necessary subterfuge to impel the acceptance of a sound disciplinarian and original general-staff officer in an army where foreign generals were growing in disfavor. Even Washington helped perpetuate the exalted-origin myth for the good of the service.

About half of General Palmer's book is devoted to Steuben's military service

in the Revolution, and the last quarter deals with his later life—squabbles over remuneration and pension, connections with the malodorous Scioto and other land deals, and the later impecunious years on his country estate in New York.

Many parts of the General's European career are laced together by conjectures, but the guesses are nearly always acknowledged. In one instance, however, the author attributes Steuben's final determination to sell his services to Congress to an unsubstantiated rumor of criminal homosexual relations with young boys. The evidence presented for this as a motive for emigration is as unsubstantiated as the charge made by the European scandalmongers, and should at least have been labeled as a guess. Also, the reader has the right to question the assumption that no other person could have done Steuben's work in creating an American army.

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## Our Mental Ancestors

**TOWARDS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: Essays in the Spiritual History of the Nineteenth.** By H. V. Routh. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1937.

MR. ROUTH'S volume deals little with the twentieth century even by implication. Rather it is an examination—almost an arraignment—of certain famous nineteenth-century literary figures and philosophers, mainly English, who suffered from a prevailing spiritual malaise. Victorian literature, Mr. Routh finds, was a "magnificent failure" in that its chief exemplars did not learn to "probe the truth without losing heart, to know the world and yet know more than human nature at its worst." From Tennyson to Hardy they all finally died of one "ism" or another—medievalism, pessimism, optimism, Darwinism, determinism. What Mr. Routh wants is a sort of scientific humanism, a "new spirituality which must be authorized by science and yet contain a religious value." He grants a measure of approval to writers—Bergson, Butler, Nietzsche—in whom he discerns the principle of creative self-determination. Although thoughtfully written for the most part, the book is vitiated by cloudy exposition, rash generalization, and even (in the chapter on Browning) contradiction. Conrad and James are harshly condemned almost without a hearing. Emerson is pigeon-holed as a little-read stylist who "encouraged [men and women] to retire into the old world culture and realize themselves in its atmosphere." There can be no quarrel with Mr. Routh's preference for writers who "restore our zest in life, our confidence in our species," but his winnowing process is a little severe. His book is more provocative than convincing.

# Roger Martin Du Gard

Nobel Prize Novelist of 1937

BY GILBERT CHASE

ROGER MARTIN DU GARD, the French novelist to whom the Nobel Prize for literature has just been awarded, is known as a profound and powerful chronicler of contemporary life. His major work is "Les Thibault," a vast family history which in the eighth and most recently published volume, "L'Été 1914," was brought up to the period of the World War.

He was born at Paris in 1881, of an old provincial family long established in the capital. He was brought up in the Catholic faith, but abandoned it in his fifteenth

Martin du Gard himself was mobilized at the outbreak of the war, and served throughout its duration as a motor-transport driver at the front. After the war he conceived the plan for his monumental chronicle of a modern Parisian family, "Les Thibault," of which the first two volumes, "Le Cahier Gris" and "Le Penitencier," appeared in 1922. These two comprised the first American volume of "The Thibaults," published in 1926. Only one further volume of this work, "Springtime of Life," has appeared here in translation.

His work reveals a certain affinity with that of Tolstoy, Proust, Romain Rolland, and André Gide. What sets him apart from such writers as Rolland and Proust, however, is the fact that he never allows a social thesis or an esthetic preoccupation to interfere with the purely novelistic unfolding of his works. It is true that his characters talk a great deal and that his novels are full of ideas ("All that I have to say passes automatically into 'Les Thibault,'" he declared); but they also contain an abundance of intense and varied dramatic action. The characters are extraordinarily vivid and human.

In addition to his *magnum opus*, Martin du Gard has written a novel dealing with the theme of incest, "Confidence Africaine" (1931); a play, "Un Taciturne" (1931), on the problem of homosexuality; and a series of rural sketches entitled "Croquis Villageois" (1933), marked by a strong and unifying realism. Another play, "Le Testament du Père Leleu," dealing with rural life, was published in 1920.

An unusual blend of realism and idealism characterizes the work of Roger Martin du Gard. His most idealistic character, Jacques Thibault, who revolts against human injustice, is crushed and defeated. But Martin du Gard sees life itself as ultimately victorious, above and beyond any personal human failure. As he has one of his characters declare, "Life is the victory which endures."



ROGER MARTIN DU GARD

year. He attended two of the best schools in Paris, the Lycée Condorcet and the Lycée Janson de Sailly, and then spent three years at the École des Chartes, from which he was graduated in 1906 with the diploma of an archivist-paleographer.

From this training in scientific methods of research he doubtless acquired much of that intellectual discipline and that capacity for patient research which gives such solidity and amplitude to his fictional output. Because of its combination of imaginative insight and documentary completeness, his work has been characterized as "the collaboration of a historian and a novelist."

It was not, however, the history of the remote past, but that of the immediate past, merging into the present, which attracted him as a novelist. His first novel, "Devenir," was published in 1908, and his second, "Jean Barois," in 1913. This latter work, in which the Dreyfus-Zola affair figures prominently, made an immediate impression upon the younger writers of France, who were soon to be plunged into the shambles of the World War.

## Excavation

By KILE CROOK

TIME and seasons are as broad  
As the world is broad, and shallow  
As the ground below the sod,—  
Earth unplowed and ever-fallow.

Dig through buttercups and grass;  
Through the elm roots sink your shovel;  
Penetrate the frost line; pass  
To the cool subjacent level;

Bare unwarmed, unfrozen clay . . .  
Clay and shale lie still together  
Six feet down, past night and day,  
Under years and every weather.