

Man of Letters

UNFORGOTTEN YEARS. By Logan Pearsall Smith. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$2.50. (Published Jan. 3.)

Reviewed by IRWIN EDMAN

THE best of autobiographies may be the least crowded with events. For what remains of interest in a life is what it signifies, and significance lies in emotions recollected and thoughts provoked by persons and by things. The remembrances of a cultivated spirit are not simply records, they are reflections, reminiscences turned into soliloquy, and a life lifted into a poet's image and a philosopher's theme. The art of autobiography was made for Logan Pearsall Smith, whose "Trivia" are a delicate monument to perceptions mingled of irony and beauty, of sensibility and that common-sense which he seems to have inherited from those Quaker ancestors he so engagingly por-

trays. "Unforgotten Years" is one of the most delightful books of its kind published in many years. Its kind is that of reflective reminiscence. It is a story told, in selective chapters, with the amused tenderness and skeptical detachment of the cultivated cosmopolitan and, deeper than the cosmopolitan, of the dedicated writer. For it is perfectly clear that Mr. Smith is in the Flaubertian tradition of an almost fanatic loyalty to the discipline of the writing art. But the story he tells is more than

his own; it constitutes a picture of a vanished world, the one inhabited by his Quaker family in Germantown, and by Henry James in England, and Santayana and Bernard Berenson on the Continent, the scene of a provincial Quaker corner of America, and of a sophisticated and expatriate America-in-Europe. It is a testament of a man of letters, in the leisurely old-fashioned sense of the word. The literati of the left or even those who "wear their old school ties a little to the left," will probably cavil. They will be annoyed at the note of condescension to our American "civilization without mind." They will resent the social scene of the writing, Mrs. Wharton's yacht. They may even resent the Ægean sea. But nobody could fail to be charmed by

the delicious savor of this exquisite and economical writing, the humorous evocation, with artful exactitude, of the life of an evangelical Quaker business man's family in Pennsylvania in the seventies or eighties, of an earlier Harvard, of an earlier one-man invasion of Oxford. Everyone will be charmed by the extraordinary portraits (somehow much more complete than their brevity would seem to make possible) of Benjamin Jowett, of Henry James, of Whitman, Matthew Arnold, Whistler, of Edith Wharton, of Mrs. Bernard Berenson, the author's gifted sister, of the Paris of a young American trying to learn to write there in the late eighties. Every writer, or lover of good writing, will be moved by the account of a ten-years' apprenticeship to writing in relative isolation in Sussex. And every reader of Whitman will be fascinated by the account of what the Good Grey Poet was like as he



From a drawing by Rothenstein
Logan Pearsall Smith

visited weeks on end the charming and intensely respectable Smith family in Germantown, with the unforgettable moment when Whitman appeared, after some meditation, in his overcoat at dinner-time, because the Smiths were having company, and he did not think his sweater would quite do. Readers will remember even more the sense Logan Pearsall Smith conveys of Whitman's superb humanity and geniality, and his sovereign passion for the art of poetry. Amusing, too, will be Mr. Smith's account of the difficulties, some of them due to illiterate English snob-bishness, of "hunting for manuscripts in England," and the rewards and varieties of that cultivated sport.

But most of all the reader will enjoy, I think, the savor and quality of the writing itself, and the temperament and realms of feeling which the book conveys. It is the same temperament that produced "Trivia," that minor classic, and the book grows out of the same soil. Mr. Smith has more than a touch of Pater, but a Pater skeptical and modernized; there is some of Matthew Arnold in him, and though he does not mention the names, Montaigne and Renan. This is the book of a bookman, and for bookmen. It will, doubtless, be too bookish for some. But what an exquisite bouquet

to this rare vintage. Or, to change and to mix the metaphor, what a distillation of life observed and remembered in this "religio grammatici."

The life recalled and reflected upon is, it is true, rather special. The Quaker evangelical world in which Mr. Smith grew up is, however, entrancing to read about, and the portrait of his pious and humorous mother and of his father's notoriously passionate and almost amorous evangelism make pages of delightful document. His later world of expatriation is special, too, and sometimes the author writes as if the world were a small club with clubhouses at Oxford, Paris, and Florence, and a House Committee consisting of Santayana, Berenson, Mrs. Wharton, and Henry James, with exchange privileges at Harvard. The House Committee do not seem to have much hope for America, with its "ice-cream soda fountains."

There is a touch of the gentle and genteel despair of an urbane old gentleman living abroad thirty years, as Mr. Smith tells us he has done, on an annuity, and recently on more. But these sublimated provincialisms may be forgiven by us provincials. For this gallery of portraits and of memories is beautifully given us by a writer who contagiously loves and exhibits the art of writing.

Irwin Edman is the author of "Philosopher's Holiday."

In the Midst of Life . . .

DR. NORTON'S WIFE. By Mildred Walker. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH

THIS intelligent novel of marital love has for its setting the medical school of a Mid-western university; for its characters, a science-loving, idealistic teacher of medicine, his stricken wife, her attractive sister, and a host of young and old doctors and their families whose counterparts are recognizable in every modern medical faculty. Its theme is the tragedy of incurable disease and its effect on the destinies of those whose training permits no escape other than honesty and courage.

When the story opens, Sue Norton lies in bed before dawn, reviewing the significant moments since her illness was first apparent, while she struggles to force her almost rudderless body to make the journey to her husband's room for one of their intimate talks—once so frequent and now so rare. As yet she does not suspect the finality of the obscure nerve disease that is insidiously undermining her beauty and vivacity, and converting her into a heavy, awkward creature with less and less control of either her muscles or her emotions. What disturbs her most is the recession of the rare intimacy that has given so much meaning and depth to their twenty years of married life. As

the story progresses, the harassed husband seeks relief and temporary escape in the companionship of her younger sister, so like her, and now the manager of Sue's household. How the wife responds to this situation, how she faces the inevitability of her fate, and how love meets this cruel test, is Mrs. Walker's story.

It would be unfair, however, to create the impression that the book is wholly sombre. Interwoven into the plot are faculty parties, hospital scenes, young assistants and their brides, all of whom, even the least important, are handled with an assurance and honesty that gives the novel the convincing quality of a photograph. Mrs. Walker has chosen a subject seldom met in fiction, and one that must have demanded considerable courage. She has handled it with rare skill and has produced a clear-cut, sensitive novel far above the common run.

Jacobite Romance

COLIN LOWRIE. By *Norah Lofts*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1939. \$2.50. (Published Jan. 3).

Reviewed by FRANCES WOODWARD

LAST summer *Norah Lofts* published "Requiem for Idols" and this reviewer then remarked that though the book might be hokum, it was at least vigorous hokum. *Norah Lofts* has plenty of vigor, and in "Colin Lowrie" she lavishes it with the same abandoned joy which lets her strain the arm of coincidence, fling her hero around the world and back, pop him in and out of danger, poverty, riches, and beds.

Whether *Miss Lofts* actually knows much about the fate of the Jacobite plotters of '45, or about the life of slaves on southern island plantations, or what her red-headed, high-hearted hero might privately have thought about his wenching is hard to say. Nor is it of any particular importance. The book is romance of the most flamboyantly unscholarly sort. Everything happens to Colin—everything *Miss Lofts* can imagine, and that's a lot. Piracy and slavery, murder and tobacco planting, wagon peddling and the snobbery of the Planters' Ball, friendship and hate and love. Lots of love, and the one great one for the little dead nun who could not keep her rendezvous, whose memory the dark amazing Virginia beauty, with the strange pale eyes and the magnificent house and the ability to run her plantation like a man could never quite vanquish. Yes, honestly, it is like that, little dead nun and all, even to "Out of that nettle danger" on the frontispiece. . . . And just the same it's fun, so that once more it must be said that though *Miss Lofts* is no great new light on the horizon of English letters, she doesn't write about Mummy and the rectory party, and she gives you a good time.

Library, Stage, and Radio

HEROD AND MARIAMNE. A play in two acts by *Clemence Dane*. New York: Doubleday Doran & Co. 1938. \$1.75.

OSCAR WILDE. A play in three acts by *Leslie and Sewell Stokes*. New York: Random House. 1938. \$2.

AIR RAID. A verse play for the radio by *Archibald MacLeish*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 75 cents.

Reviewed by RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

THE precipitous ups and downs of the theatrical terrain, on which the most experienced guides often remain lost for years at a time, are a little gloomily illustrated by the fates of *Miss Dane's* play and that of the *Stokeses*. Both have passed beyond the power of criticism to help or harm, the first—and better—by abject failure, the second by success with which no one could tamper. Before "Herod and Mariamne" opened and closed on the road, everybody hoped much for it; before "Oscar Wilde" became a sell-out at the *Fulton Theater*, it had fared very differently abroad.

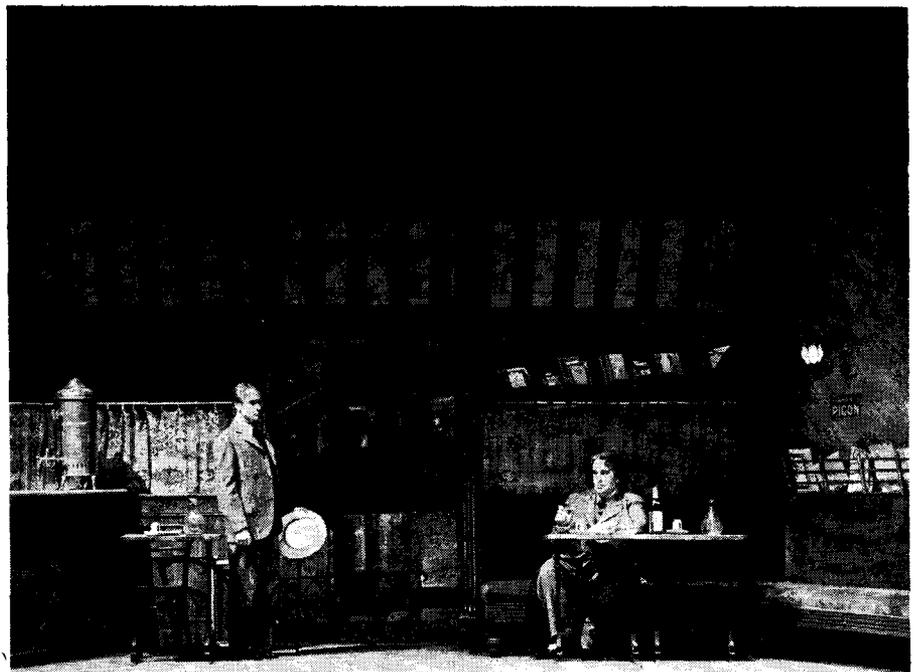
It is, of course, easier now, in the lee of the event, to explain these matters. In *Miss Dane's* play, admirably written as it is, one can detect the seeds of failure which sprouted to make ruefully incongruous the prophecy committed to the dust-wrapper of the printed version by some anonymous seer: "Clemence Dane's new play, with *Katharine Cornell* in the magnificent role of *Mariamne*, is certain to be one of the outstanding theatrical events of this season," that one wrote, taking what amounted to a record leap

into the dark. Well, *Miss Cornell* was in the role, all right, from *Pittsburgh* on, as far as the drama went. But the role was not magnificent. It is precisely there that *Miss Dane* took her major stumble.

Externally it is a role to entice any actress, partly because none of the other characters speak to, or about, *Herod's* queen without commenting favorably upon her beauty. She is beautiful and sad, and she dies, in a manner of speaking, for love. At any rate, she dies, as nearly as *Miss Dane* conveys it to this reviewer, to teach *Herod* a lesson about love; the lesson not to be jealous. *Herod* had the rather possessive habit, when he went himself into danger, of leaving behind instructions that his wife should be killed if anything happened to him. And when the queen learned of this, through the weakness of *Herod's* instruments, she was hurt. When *Herod* learned that she had learned, he could only conclude that she had beguiled her potential executioners with woman's way of beguilement.

It is psychologically a little intricate; it is psychologically even a little melodramatic, for a play which maintains a modern attitude. And also, for this reason and that, it leaves *Mariamne* rather unsympathetic; a little of the "you'll-be-sorry-you-did-this-to-me" type of suicide. *Miss Cornell* and the rest may have noticed this, on the road. They may also have noticed that, in spite of the literary excellence of the drama, most of its action does not take place within view of the audience. And that, generally, is fatal.

The *Stokes* play, for all its success, is synthetic on the page as it was, to me



Vandamm

Robert Morley (right) as Oscar Wilde. "When his troubles come, [the authors] dissolve in tears and sentiment" . . .