



A CROQUET PARTY IN THE SIXTIES

## Crinoline and Croquet

*VICTORIAN PANORAMA.* By Peter Quennell. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1937. \$3.

*LADIES AND GENTLEMEN IN VICTORIAN FICTION.* By E. M. Delafield. New York: Harper & Bros. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

THE age of crinoline and croquet, of tyrannical fathers and sentimental lovers, of docile children and exacting governesses, the Victorian epoch so out of fashion as a manner of living and so completely the fashion as a subject for description, wears an endearing, if sometimes amusing, aspect in these volumes. Mr. Quennell's book presents a survey of life and manners from contemporary photographs and wears the quaint appearance which the family album, with its belles and beaux in the outmoded clothes of a bygone day, always produces. But for all its entertaining nature it is a serious attempt to project the period as one not only serene in the belief in its own greatness but awake to new and disturbing trains of thought and pressing problems. The running commentary which accompanies the well-chosen pictures passes in rapid review varied aspects of the Victorian scene, dealing skillfully and discriminatingly with family life, with low life, the stage, fashion and taste, the London of costermongers and riverdredgers,

of ample, ugly houses, cellar restaurants, with that culminating glory of the period, the Great Exhibition of 1851, and with certain of the outstanding personalities of the time.

Miss Delafield's book is an anthology of excerpts from the minor Victorian novelists and writers for children designed to give a record of the Victorian domestic scene. Its quotations are strung together on a slight thread of commentary which points their content, and highly entertaining they are. Here are parents and children, spinster aunts and indulgent uncles, young girls just arriving at womanhood, lovers, husbands exerting a majestic superiority over admiring wives, young ladies indulging in tears and swoons, adolescents coming down with brain fever as a result of disappointment, elders and youngsters engaging in blind man's buff, puss-in-the-corner, and charades, dancing the waltz under protest from the conventional, and all of them feeling and declaring their feelings with a sentimentality foreign to the present day. Miss Delafield relies in the main on Charlotte M. Yonge for her excerpts, but she quotes, too, from such other favorites of Victorian times as Elizabeth Wetherell, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Rhoda Broughton. Dipped into anywhere her book is sure to afford amusement, but read as a whole it, like Mr. Quennell's volume, helps to recreate a period.



LEICESTER SQUARE IN 1883: From "Victorian Panorama."

## Cromwell as Dictator

*OLIVER CROMWELL: A DICTATOR'S TRAGEDY.* By Mary Taylor Blauvelt. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1937. \$3.50.

Reviewed by WILBUR CORTEZ ABBOTT

IF one were superstitious about such things, one might think from the number of books which have lately appeared about Cromwell that we were at the beginning or even in the midst of a revolution, for such periods have always been rich in Cromwell literature. It was so before 1789 and between 1789 and 1815. It was so in all the revolutionary periods of the nineteenth century, and it is even said—though on what authority it is hard to discover—that Carlyle's *Cromwell* has been extremely popular in Russia since about 1900, especially immediately before 1917. If there is anything in omens, then, what of the fact that within two years there have appeared no less than six books in English about the great Protector?

One says advisedly "about the Protector" for not all of them have been in any strict sense biographies, least of all biographies which seek to discover new materials which might illuminate his character and career. Most of them, in fact, have been rather new "appreciations" adapted to this generation, some, like Professor Barker's interesting and suggestive essay, frankly so; some—we name no names—mere "propaganda" for this view or that of Cromwell and the modern world. Miss Blauvelt's book lies, as it were, somewhere between. It is, as the author frankly and truly says, "not a life." Nor could that be expected from a work which, as she says again frankly and truly, pays "very little attention to either military or foreign affairs"; the sub-title "*A Dictator's Tragedy*," reveals what may be called the subjective character of the book. Its aim is chiefly to interpret Cromwell as a man who, devoted to the cause of parliamentary government and religious liberty, was driven by the force of circumstances into dictatorship—"his life a tragedy of conflicting ideals, his career a successful failure."

The thesis is not wholly new; it may not be wholly true; but Miss Blauvelt has ranged herself on the side of the angels as unreservedly as Mr. Belloc has taken the other side. She has written an entertaining and persuasive book which will be deservedly popular, especially among those who are prepared to be convinced. She shows an extraordinarily wide acquaintance with the utterances of the Protector, which she quotes with great effect to prove his single-hearted devotion to his principles. She writes—despite some lapses—in a style which carries the reader on; and she has produced a book which will undoubtedly have many readers. Yet it has often been noted that by a careful selection of the evidence it is as

easy to prove that Cromwell was a single-minded, pure-hearted, unselfish, heroic defender of liberty as that he was a hypocritical, ambitious, crafty, and unscrupulous opportunist—and both have been done.

Human nature and affairs are not as clear-cut as that. Few men—and Cromwell least of all—are all black or all white. One may give him credit for seeking the best course, yet admit that many things he did were indefensible; one may argue that he was a hypocrite and a self-seeker, yet agree that some things he did were good.

It is better to face the facts, however unpalatable, and admit that there is something to be said on either side, that the Puritans and their leader were not so entirely beyond reproach and the great majority of the English people were not so entirely wrong, and that, whatever Cromwell's words, sometimes his acts spoke even louder than his rhetoric.

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## A Novelist's Letters

*LETTERS TO A FRIEND. By Winifred Holtby. Edited by Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1938. \$3.50.*

**R**EADERS of Vera Brittain's "Testament of Youth" who came to feel almost a sense of intimacy with the friend who figured so constantly in its pages, and of Miss Holtby's own novels which in the last, "South Riding," seemed to be reaching a rich maturity, will turn with interest to this volume of her letters. The greater part of them were written between the years 1920 and 1926, a few within the next nine years, and the last in June, 1935. They were addressed to Miss McWilliam with whom Winifred Holtby had worked in the closest association in a W.A.A.C. camp in France during the war and for whom her friendship continued undiminished after it. The correspondence varies in interest, deepening in intensity as the years go on and its writer gains in experience and expands her contacts and occupations. The early letters are full of small incidents of daily life with the emotion of the war years ever and again throbbing through their chatter; the later ones, while still much concerned with small events and happenings, show a mind deeply engrossed by the pressing problems of the day as they were brought to Miss Holtby's notice through her work on the League of Nations. Winifred Holtby loved life and people; she delighted in nature and the out-of-doors, read widely and well, and traveled considerably. Her correspondence is lively and colorful, shot through with charming descriptions of places, apt characterizations of books, and affectionate gossip of friends and relatives. It reveals a ruminative mind and a rich nature, altogether a personality of distinction.

# Benchley's Desperate Remedy

*AFTER 1903—WHAT? By Robert Benchley. Illustrated by Gluyas Williams. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1938. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

**I** REMEMBER my old friend Irving Telemouse (he gives you an awfully good shine for five cents over on Eighth Avenue) once posing (or popping) the question as to whether Robert Xavier Benchley might really be regarded as a "tendential" writer. (That was after we had a couple of beers together at Max's on the corner.) In replying to him I experienced some difficulty in pronouncing the word "tendential" and finally gave the whole thing up with a slightly embarrassed laugh. But the question of exactly what constitutes Mr. Benchley's significance in what we too lightly term our modern world, must remain to haunt and baffle those hungry generations that are now so rapidly treading us down. That is the thought for this week.

The man seems to be a humorist, and yet the Pagliacci undertones are seldom absent. Dr. Foster Kennedy has recently pointed out that among neurologists it is "pretty well determined that the hypothalamus, a portion of the mid-brain, controls the moods of human beings." My personal conviction is that Robert Grosvenor Benchley possesses no mid-brain, but a highly developed spinal cortex which reverses the function of the hypothalamus, thus leaving the man a positive victim of uncontrollable moods. He's moody. But he's not sankey.

Well, he's a little bit sankey, at that. Generalizations about Benchley are dangerous. He's really very funny, too, in the talkies.

The result of all this—in case you actually wish me to get anywhere in this review—has been something-or-other *scribendi*, and its fruits eight or nine books which, to me, make more sense than Gertrude Stein; though that, of course, is a matter of opinion.

"Has Benchley a method?" is another question that has often bogged down the savants. To this I can confidently reply, "No." As to the anagrams, hidden acrostics, paranomasia (play upon words), or even paranomia (incorrect naming of objects) concealed in his writings, I am not

so positive. But surely spontaneity is the key to his particular form of mental disorder. The man is spontaneously cuckoo.

Still, I have never noted in him a characteristic two-syllable whistle.

Still, he says some pretty acute things—about the chromosome and gene racket, for instance.

I have said that Benchley seems to be a humorist, and right now, in order to give Bob a break, I want to retract that "seems." Maybe "humorist" isn't the right word either. All I know is, he makes you laugh. It is therefore especially interesting in this new treatise of his to find him trying to get the matter of "Why We Laugh" settled with Max Eastman. "All laughter," he says, "is merely a compensatory reflex to take the place of sneezing. What we really want to do is sneeze, but as that is not always possible, we laugh instead. Sometimes we underestimate our powers and laugh and sneeze at the same time. This raises hell all around." I really think he has got hold of something there.

He has some good suggestions also for our Treasury Department,

in the matter of questions they might ask us on income tax blanks, because the French go much farther than we do in such matters. (They ask, for instance, "For what period last year did you have an airship at your disposal?") I like some of Benchley's suggestions:

4. Was that your wife that you were with in Chicago on February 10th?
5. How did your wife happen to be going to Chicago with you?
6. Turn around and let's see your hair-cut. Who cut it last, for Heaven's sake?
7. Is that your own hat? If so, what were you thinking of?
8. What is your *real* name?
9. We said—what is your *real* name?
10. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

At a time when all issues are rather confused there has emerged in the person of Benchley one of the finest little issue-confusers current. In fact, the man looms pretty large today. He may loom larger and larger as time goes on. Perhaps he ought to go on a diet?

This is the tenth—now I've actually counted them—of Bob Benchley's books. It's swell.

*See page 22 for biographical note on Robert C. Benchley.*



DRAWING BY GLUYAS WILLIAMS  
From "After 1903—What?"