

# Small Talk of History

*THE PRIVATE LETTERS OF PRINCESS LIEVEN TO PRINCE METTERNICH, 1820-1826. Edited by Peter Quennell. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1938. \$3.75.*

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

PRINCESS LIEVEN was the wife of the Russian Ambassador at the court of George IV. She was beautiful, intelligent, and witty, and she had a passion for politics and diplomacy which did not find its full outlet in the career of her husband. She enjoyed playing the game on her own, and she had opportunities such as come to few women. In 1818 she had met Prince Metternich who was then at the height of his power. For a brief period they were lovers; then the *liaison* continued on a strange half-passionate, half-political basis for some eight years thereafter. Regularly the Princess sent her informal and spicy reports on English affairs to the Chancellor in Vienna. She was in reality his unofficial agent in London, and her comments on the political situation were considerably more informative than those which reached Austria through official channels.

Her charm, her gayety, and, in particular, her talent for good listening brought her the friendship of the most influential statesmen. The Duke of Wellington, Lord Castlereagh, Lord Grey, Lord Liverpool,

Mr. Canning, all seemed to enjoy a daily *tête-à-tête* with a lady who sympathized with and understood their political anxieties. The King himself and his brother, the Duke of York, were her intimate associates. What they confided to her filled note after note that went hastily off to Vienna. She reveled in the sense of power which this secret activity brought her; she saw herself as the manipulator of political destinies. Actually, her power was probably less than she supposed. Her relationship to Metternich was not unknown, and astute men like Castlereagh and Canning knew how to make the most of the chances she offered for reaching the Chancellor's private ear.

The originals of the letters she wrote to Metternich from 1820 to 1826 are apparently lost, but at some later date she copied out portions of them, arranged as in a journal. It is this compilation which has at last come to light and which Mr. Quennell has so ably translated. She quite obviously meant it to be published. The intimacies which must once have figured prominently in the letters have all disappeared, but enough remains of political gossip, of personal judgments on people and events, of racy narrative, to make it a most lively and entertaining document. Its pictures of the daily routine at George's Brighton Pavilion are a delicious addition to the small-talk of history.



*Pinchot*

NEGLEY FARSON

## Sequel

*TRANSGRESSOR IN THE TROPICS. By Negley Farson. Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1938. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

ONE would think that, having already been practically everywhere else, Mr. Farson had an adequate reason for the decision to turn himself loose on South America. The reason he gives in this book is that he was possessed by some inner urge to voyage thither and "set things right" with himself. Whether he succeeded, one never learns; it suffices that he had a call.

With this solemnity for a beginning, the book goes on to present Farson's South America, land of the supersensational. Lifted on the wings of hyperbole, the reader soars over most of the South American scene, viewing iron-handed dictators, bar-room brawls, steaming jungles, and those great Hollywood mountains, the Andes; but the effect of this height is to flatten out the landscape. Farson's own experiences, however, were so mildly supersensational that he has had to rely on hearsay for the main thrills. This is unfortunate, because it weakens the reader's confidence to hear the commonplace tall tales of the tropics repeated for fact, or with inadequate reservations. In addition, Mr. Farson's information is unreliable. This reviewer, who claims only a lay knowledge of the field, could reveal to him the great mystery of how the Jivaro head-hunters shrink the human heads that are offered for sale to the tourists; but he cannot account for the shrinkage of Trinidad by almost half of its length and four-fifths of its breadth between the "Encyclopædia Britannica's" figures and Mr. Farson's.

The many transgressions that may justify the title have to do with the English language—not, as might be supposed, with the moral code.

## The Beasts of the Flame

By HELEN HOYT

LIGHTLY and lithely through the umbrage of smoke  
Glide the sinewy beasts of the flame: lions  
With yellow tails lashing, manes tossed,  
Nostrils searching the wind; undulant leopards,  
Lean panthers of burning, their rippling pelts,  
Their glistening flanks, gilded with a shining dew.

Muscles of lunging shoulders crash through the rustling woods,  
Eyes phosphorescent glint from the depths of the shadow.  
Amber and tawny their pointed heads as they pace,  
Roused from smoke-drowsy lairs, restive with strength;  
Sleek jaguars of langourous motion, swift pumas of burning;  
Their bared teeth sharp with desire, their talons, adroit,  
Grown cruel with long hunger of waiting!

Now let them wait no more!  
Too long have the coils of the smoke, rock-caught,  
Writhed in the choking hollows, dragging their black length  
Torturously through secret nights;  
Too long have the beasts of the flame lain hid in their furtive dens;  
The gleaming fire-claws, the cusped teeth, too long have been sheathed!  
Now let the tigers of restless desire rouse from their lairs,  
Let all the lustful and desperate fiercely spring forth.  
No longer go panting and famishing, furtive from ambush to ambush,  
But stalking their prey in bright heat.  
The woods be torn with claws, ravaged with insatiable jaws;  
Flame be the prey of flame, the hunters and hunted,  
Crying out with harsh throats of fire till all be devoured!

## Some Sidelights on Mary Wollstonecraft

FOUR NEW LETTERS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND HELEN M. WILLIAMS. Edited by Benjamin P. Kurtz and Carrie C. Autrey. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1937. \$1.50.

Reviewed by LEONARD BACON

THIS small volume consists of four not very long letters, three from Mary Wollstonecraft and one from Helen Maria Williams, addressed to their American friend Ruth Barlow, who was the wife of that curious Connecticut Yankee Joel Barlow, poet, financial adventurer, and, in his last and tragic phase, minister plenipotentiary to France. The letters were written in 1794 in the height of the Terror, and as they might not be immediately comprehensible to 1937, the editors have provided a clear and informative introduction and good brief notes. The result is a book which throws a great deal of light on aspects of the French Revolution, with which this reviewer, for one, was not perfectly familiar. The intimate daily concerns of slightly radical ladies, matters which must be dealt with irrespective of public events, the business affairs of their husbands or lovers, not excluding linen for Gilbert Imlay's shirts, all the conventional but forgotten background of the time when it was good to be alive, are set down in brief fortuitous strokes. We discover Mary Wollstonecraft doubly pregnant with a book and a baby. Helen Maria Williams is giving parties almost every night to forty or fifty people. Nevertheless she finds time to tell Mrs. Barlow that her carriage was blocked on her way to the Rue St. Honoré by the mob round the tumbrils that carried Danton, La Croix, Herault de Séchelles, and Camille Des Moulins to the Place of the Revolution. Helen Maria thought they seemed "indifferent to their fate," and further that "criminals" ought not to be executed so publicly. It is odd to consider that an English lady suffered no inconvenience except a détour at the moment when Danton was steeling himself to display no weakness.

If only for one reason this book was thoroughly well worth publishing. It exhibits in quite an astonishing way the interdependences, one might say the cross-references of the time. The authorship of the "Vindication of the Rights of Women," who was to die bearing the child of Godwin and the wife of Shelley, is on easy and intimate terms with the poet of the first American epic. So was the egregious Helen Maria, who for her part had been celebrated by Wordsworth in verses which superbly exemplify his profound capacity for bathos. The letters permit us to look for a moment into the mechanism of the time. We are aware of mighty workings. But there is nothing wholly un-

familiar to us in the spectacle of men and women who contemplate, with idle seriousness, the symptoms of impending change and who feel for that reason vaguely virtuous and a little in advance of their age.

It is too bad that we have not Ruth Barlow's side of the correspondence. She was clearly a nice girl, perhaps too nice to tell of the queer group of sentimentalists and swindlers who appear to have made up the Anglo-American colony of Revolutionary Paris. One wonders if she carried novel ideas home with her when she returned to the palace of art where Joel Barlow expatiated and conferred by the waters of Rock Creek. A woman who had known Mary Wollstonecraft in Paris of the Jacobins might have sown strange tares in Washington of the Federalists. But whether or no she came back with a gospel, she deserves well at our hands for glimpses however fleeting, on the one hand of a sentimental imbecile and on the other of a thoroughly noble woman. One cannot read the little relics of Mary Wollstonecraft without being troubled that a creature of such frank heart and powerful intellect should have been born to be deceived by a detestable scoundrel and married to a money-cadging prophet of perfectibility.

The editors are to be complimented for presenting so well documents, not of the first importance, perhaps, but full of the life of a time too like our own not to have interest for us.

## Gayety and Tragedy

YOUNG CATHERINE. By E. M. Almedingen. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KATHARINE ANTHONY

MISS ALMEDINGEN'S book is a gay presentation of a grim and tragic history; and, by that token, a faithful echo of Great Catherine herself, in whose life gayety and tragedy were mingled as they have been mingled in few human lives. That is why her story has such a perennially romantic attraction.

Miss Almedingen's connection with the legend is itself a romantic story. She is descended from Russian ancestors who played a part in the events of Catherine's reign and, in particular, witnessed the revolution of 1762 which placed her on the throne. The details of the happening were a household legend in the home where the author grew up. It is quite natural that she should have made this the climax of her story of Catherine when the time came for her to write it. "Young Catherine" ends with the ascension of the Empress to the throne in 1762.

One should not look for strait-laced accuracy in a historical novel. Yet one is tempted to do so in this notable instance. The facts are so amazing that any touch-



FROM THE JACKET OF "YOUNG CATHERINE"

ing-up seems only to tone them down. Miss Almedingen makes Figgy of Alhalt's first lover, not her uncle as he actually was, but her cousin. The whole affair is by this change turned into a rather conventional first love instead of the first note in a long symphonic tragedy which was to recur again and again throughout the ensuing years. Miss Almedingen casts the heroine of the novel in the delicate mold of a mother with one child. The buxom fact that she had five children—three up to the point where the novel leaves her—is the much more startling reality. Fiction apparently must arrange that Stanislas Poniatovsky was Catherine's one great love; but Catherine says that she loved all her lovers—or almost all of them—not even excluding the very ordinary father of Emperor Paul. Yet all such losses in strangeness of fact are compensated for in the novel by the fresh light of a personal imagination overflowing the familiar figures with new and life-like hues.

The background of European politics which is inseparable from any life of Catherine the Great receives its due importance in the story. The map of Europe of 1745 was as shifting an arrangement of lines and boundaries as is the map of today. Miss Almedingen has her picture of its loyalties, chicaneries, criss-crossings, and double-crossings well in hand. Her treatment of Chancellor Bestuzheff, the first great pro-Russian politician of Russia, showing his gradual change from an implacable enemy of the young German Princess to a friend and ally of the completely Russified Catherine, is a fine glimpse of history. One sees how the nationalist dreams of this forgotten statesman influenced the dreams of young Catherine and prepared the way for the state policies of Catherine the Great.

Katharine Anthony is the author of a life of Catherine the Great.