

Boyhood in Wales

THE WOODEN SPOON. By Wyn Griffith.
New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1938.
\$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

WYN GRIFFITH'S story of his boyhood in a Welsh village is a marvel of much in little. The tale itself is slight and severely unadorned, but there are evocative half-strokes here and there, quick, suggestive phrases, emotions not mentioned but seen and sensed, all of which envelop the little story in a whole atmosphere of experience. It seems to be Griffith's unusual method of writing which gets that fresh, unstudied effect for him. For he goes at his story from two angles and takes us into his confidence as he goes. He is the writer looking back at his youth, and we sit at his side and hear him discuss his ideas aloud, what he means to write about, his anxiety to be unliterary and to approximate the raw truth of a boy's life; and suddenly we are beguiled into forgetting the artifices even as he disclaims them, and we are deep in the consciousness of this Welsh youth.

Certainly it is clear that Griffith's over-

weening modesty, perhaps the most sophisticated of devices, masks a confident, powerful expressiveness. Only a sure talent could say so little of poverty and yet make of it so real and poignant an element, or place the Welsh landscape, sea, sky, so immediately before us with scarcely a paragraph anywhere that is devoted to solid description. The boy himself, Ned, is as elemental a figure in the little Welsh world as one of the cattle he tends, or the earth itself. He, with his parents and the other farmers and seamen of the village, lives according to the simple, unthinking rituals that have come to them out of their long island history. The carving of the wooden spoon of betrothal, the theme which carries the book to its surprising finish, is only one of the many rituals and magics that appear, and there is a most beautiful tale of faith and evil, eleven pages long, that breaks into the narrative suddenly, toward the end, to give us a brief vision of the poetry of Wales. It matters little, with all of this, to note that Griffith does slip into some of the literary habits he fears, some worn phrasings, some obvious mannerisms. They cannot mar the essential freshness and vigor of his work.

Persian Wedding

THE WELL OF ARARAT. By Emmanuel Varandyan. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by COURTLANDT CANBY

THIS is not really a novel. It is a highly colored, detailed painting of a wedding in a Persian-Armenian village of Northwestern Persia, a varied genre scene of a complex traditional ceremony entered into by the likable and genuinely depicted peasants of this village with all their souls and imaginations. The whole is seen simply and effectively through the eyes of a young boy, who conceives an adolescent passion for the beautiful bride. This thread of story, complicated by the bride's secret love for Aris, the best man, is held in slow suspense while the long wedding ceremonies, lasting many days, are painted in with a careful brush, with a love for the mystical and the poetic in the old traditions that is truly Persian. The wedding out of the way, the author releases the plot to a sudden and harrowing climax of the duel of willow whips between Aris and the bridegroom in the night. The scene is



EMMANUEL
VARANDYAN

overwhelming, but on second thought one wonders if the end has not been too sudden and violent after the slow-moving body of the book.

For the description of the wedding (which fills most of the book) as a beautifully told study of ceremony is perfect, but as a part of a story, of a novel, it is in too much detail for modern readers; the action moves too slowly. Yet personally, I would not like to see a word cut out of it. The author's style is unaffected and simple, and his descriptive powers quite equal to the most complex scene before him.

There is something in the book that raises it above a mere genre scene, and that is the quietly insistent emphasis on the modern innovations which were filtering into this and other villages from Russia in the days just before the war. The young

men all want to be revolutionists, the old men are troubled by the slow violation of the ancient traditions which rule their lives. In this gradual seeping in of change may be read the whole history of modern Persia and of the East. It is this which keeps the book from seeming too exotic, too unreal.



From the jacket of "Under Capricorn."

Drama Down Under

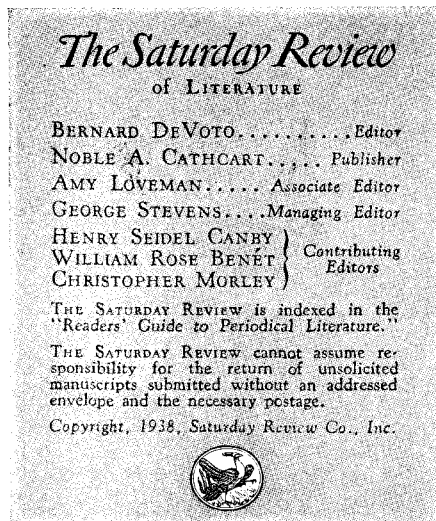
UNDER CAPRICORN. By Helen Simpson. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE inlet on the coast of New South Wales called Botany Bay is famous in song and story for the first establishment there of the English penal settlement, but at the end of the eighteenth century the settlement was removed from its shores to near the site of Sydney. Miss Simpson, who is a fourth generation Australian, has seized upon this historical background with relish, and written a rattling good romance of the time, beginning with the arrival of a new English Governor in 1831. With Sir Richard Bourke comes his debonair and reckless young cousin, Charles Adair, to seek his fortune in a new land. In the home of the astonishing Samson Flusky, Esq. he encounters a lost lady of mystery, plunged into dipsomania, the Lady Henrietta, who married a felon, now an Emancipist in this new strange world. In Flusky and Lady Henrietta Miss Simpson has created two characters that would have vastly appealed to Stevenson, and the young English hero is both dashing and appealing.

At the start, the author speaks of her "highly-coloured, improbable, and yet simple story." That is accurate, but as a graphic romance in a strange setting, "Under Capricorn" is better than the general run. The hot and crowded streets of the new and difficult colony swarm with strange life. The private affairs of the chief characters furnish plenty of suspense. The book has atmosphere and verve, and fully acquaints one with the drama of early Sydney.

See page 19 for biographical note on Helen Simpson.



Report on Photography

COUNTING on the assent of the congregation, the editor intends to let the world spin on toward destruction without comment this week. Even an editor is sometimes entitled to what William James called a moral holiday, and besides it is time to report on photographic publishing.

There has always been a heavy production of books on the theory and practice of photography, its esthetics, its chemistry and physics, its general procedures and special applications. The amazing spread of photography as a hobby during the last few years has doubled or tripled the output. As a class, these books are standardized and repetitious to an extreme, dreadfully dull, and almost useless. A beginner can learn something from the simplest of them and an expert can learn much from the most advanced and experimental, but the average amateur who knows how to load a camera, produce a printable negative, and print it can learn little or nothing. The treatises on esthetics are all screaming nonsense; the practical books all say the same things and most of what they say is either unsound or irrelevant to the amateur's interests. He keeps on buying them because he is an amateur—because his hobby is his love. And the books are bad because very little about any skilled craft can be put into print.

The amateur's hope is that he may learn to make photographs like Steichen's or Bourke-White's, or at least like a newspaper staff photographer's. He won't, and especially he won't by means of books. Manufacturers of cameras and equipment pack pamphlets of instructions with their products. One who has mastered those pamphlets can ignore ninety-eight per cent of the literature of his hobby. Skill comes from practice, from taking pictures, developing them, printing them, and studying the mistakes. There is no substitute for practice and very little theory or generalization that can supplement it. A few afternoons in the field with a skilled photographer and a few evenings

in the darkroom with him will teach the amateur more than he can get from the whole literature, but no matter how much he associates with experts he can become one only by laboriously and painfully practising the craft itself. He will not take as good pictures as a newspaper photographer until he has spent a comparable effort on the job.

In recent years the development of the miniature camera has made the experience of the amateur even more disheartening. The miniature, or in one of the ugliest coinages of recent years the "minicam," is an instrument of scientific precision, designed and machined as accurately as laboratory apparatus. It is the hardest of all cameras to use, not only to use well but even to use for casual snapshots. Only an expert can do satisfactory work with it, but it is compact and portable (except when tricked out with the expensive gadgets that can be affixed to it), it has produced the spectacular vulgarity called candid photography, and it has the novelty and snob appeal that produce fads. Consequently people who would think twice before buying a microtome for a pencil sharpener or a Rolls-Royce for a beach wagon have, by thousands, bought miniature cameras for work that they could do much better with dollar brownies. The resulting frustration is enormous.

To ease the frustration and to capitalize on the fad, a new department of photographic literature has developed. There are scores of books on the miniature camera—how to operate it, what excellent pictures experts can make with it, what ingenious uses it can be put to. Few of them are worth anything to anyone; fewer still are worth anything to the beginner or to the amateur who has already developed a moderate degree of skill. For the latter, practically the only useful book on the miniature camera in print is the "Leica Manual" (Morgan & Lester; \$4), a third and revised edition of which has recently appeared. It covers the whole field of miniature photography, including such advanced specialties as ophthalmological research, and is packed full with practical directions, clear explanations, and immediately useful data. The new edition has been brought almost even with the rapid progress of technology—though some discussion of the new and very unorthodox fine-grain developers would have been helpful—and contains several new chapters, including a fascinating one by Anton Bauman on his professional methods, and one devoted to wild but disarming generalizations by Manuel Komroff. It is indispensable to the miniaturist, and first-rate wish-fulfillment literature as well. But it has one serious omission: it neglects to tell the reader how to make pictures as good as the hundreds it reproduces.

Until Mr. Richard L. Simon published his "Miniature Photography" (Simon &

Schuster; \$1.75) there was no book that could be recommended to the bewildered souls who were thinking of buying a miniature camera or the more bewildered souls who had recently bought one. Mr. Simon, an intelligent and skillful amateur, writes simply and concretely about the beginner's problems. He says everything that can be usefully said about them; the book is simple, clear, adequate, and sensible. He provides the essential information, points it up with what he has learned for himself, and resolutely avoids both the theory and the advanced practice of photography. It is the only book on the market that can be recommended to a novice.

The editor has only praise for Mr. Simon's book, but is disposed to raise a howl about his editorial monopoly. Lots of us hams would like to write books about photography, but few of us own publishing houses. In publishing his own book Mr. Simon is taking an unfair advantage of us and should be cited for investigation, or possibly for boycott. The editor, who has been able to use his position only to publish an occasional photograph of a literary person, has been a ham longer than Mr. Simon, takes just as dubious pictures, and is just as full of data, notions and experiences, and assorted manias and grievances. Open offer to the publishing profession: there is a man in this office who could be persuaded to write a book about photography.

The photographic press goes on expanding, and we hope to make a survey of it soon. *Life*, whose original formula called for equal parts of the decapitated Chinaman, the flogged Negro, the surgically explored peritoneum, and the rapidly slipping chemise, has decided to appeal to more normal and more intelligent minds. It now spends much more energy on the news and on a kind of visual journalistic investigation which becomes increasingly interesting as it becomes more expert. *Look* has also moderated the fine sensationalism and obscenity of its earliest issues, and has done some elementary but promising crusading. The blood-and-nakedness formula abandoned by the pioneers has been taken up by a dozen new accessories of the moving picture business, and by several vicious but probably ephemeral sheets which carry salacity and vicarious cruelty to a new high. The profits latent in scandal, horror, and obscenity are always large, but they involve a certain risk. If the money which supports these new ventures does not dry up as the business-index falls, various organizations will probably take action against them. This magazine is frequently asked whether it does not believe in any limitation whatever on the freedom of the press. It does not, but it intends to be busily occupied elsewhere when the censors get to work on the keyhole magazines.