

# The British Read Halsey

BY IRWIN EDMAN

Mr. Edman, on holiday in England during the past summer, read aloud passages from Margaret Halsey's "With Malice toward Some" to his hosts in Devonshire, with the following results.

**P**ERHAPS the many readers of "With Malice toward Some" wonder what the English will make of it. I have one guess, based on an advance experience in a Devonshire inn last summer.

The Englishman and his wife were the most genial possible stereotypes of London suburbia, and they had been, in the diffident, I-hope-you-do-not-mind-my-intrusion manner of English friendliness, extremely kind. He smoked a pipe and quoted *Pickwick* at length, and complained that no one wrote like that any more. She got books from the circulating library at Boots's the Chemist in a town fourteen miles away. But there were no more books with nice people in them. I seemed to know about books, they said; what did I recommend? I seemed to be laughing out loud at a book yesterday at tea-time; was it, Mr. Grigg asked, as good as *Pickwick*?

I gulped. I thought of Miss Halsey's comments on English food. She had not, I knew, stayed at this inn, but her diatribes fitted its cuisine. I thought of her report on Englishwomen's hats and shoes; she *must* have known Mrs. Grigg. I thought of her comments on English conversational technique, its expert emptiness: she might have been walking across the moors with Mr. and Mrs. Grigg and me yesterday. Dared I show them the book? I gulped again.

"It's a little book partly about England, about Devonshire, written by a young woman, a friend of mine. Her husband taught at Exeter for a year."

"How very interesting," beamed little Mrs. Grigg. "Fancy that! So close by, too." "Did she like England?" asked Mr. Grigg.

"Ye-es," I said, "in a way she did, especially the landscape and the strawberry jam."

"Ra-ther!" said Mr. Grigg.

"May we read it?" asked Mrs. Grigg bashfully. "If you are through with it, I mean to say."

"Look here," said Mr. Grigg, "couldn't you read it to us after tea? That *would* be jolly. I say!"

I gulped again. "Why, yes," I said slowly. He detected some embarrassment.

"If it's not too much trouble to fetch it," he added.

"I have it right here," I said. "Let me find a good passage." I thumbed the book for a harmless-looking one.

You learn after you have been in England three or four days that when a Briton says "it isn't English" there is nothing to do but pick up your hat and tiptoe quietly away.

The Griggs looked puzzled. "She writes very clearly," said Mr. Grigg. "But just what does she mean?"

I tried again. My eye lighted on:

The English eschew the temptations of achievement and symmetry and lie quietly down to let the universe roll over them. It frees the juices, I am bound to admit, but it leaves the poor Britons considerably mashed.

"How very odd," said Mrs. Grigg.

A London store's idea of a well-turned-out woman is something resembling a Biblical character in a charade.

"She is very original," said Mrs. Grigg. Mr. Grigg looked reflective, looked at his wife, and burst out laughing.

"Jolly good, that," he said. "She hits it off. Read some more."

Mrs. Grigg looked first puzzled, then aggrieved. "You said you liked *my* hats, John."

"Oh, I was thinking of everyone else's. Read some more." I read aloud Miss Hal-

sey's misere on the English cuisine.

It is possible to eat English piecrust, whatever you may think at first. The English eat it, and when they stand up and walk away, they are hardly bent over at all.

Mr. Grigg guffawed. "Hardly bent over at all," he repeated. "Jolly good, that 'hardly'; she does know England and English food. She must be very clever. Read some more."

I read about the Bishop's wife at the garden party ("she knows *our* Bishop's wife, I'll wager," said Mr. Grigg); I read the account of the iceberg sociability at a London party.

"Poor dear," said Mrs. Grigg, "she must have been very unhappy here."

"How very amusing she must have found it," said Mr. Grigg. "And it reads just like Dickens."

"I must ask them to have it at Boots's," said Mrs. Grigg. "I am sure there must be nice people in it somewhere."

"Yes, there are," I said, "a lot of gentry. But you wouldn't like what she says about them."

"They're very jolly people," said Mr. Grigg. "Like *Pickwick*." And he borrowed the book, and while I read his *Pickwick*, he chuckled till dinner over my Halsey, once or twice laughing uproariously.

"Very good, that about the hats," he said as he handed it back to me.

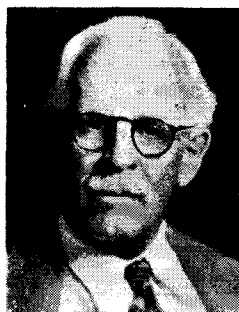
## Exploring for Plants

THE WORLD WAS MY GARDEN. By David Fairchild. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1938. \$3.75.

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

**M**R. FAIRCHILD was, for more than twenty years, head of the division of Foreign Plant Exploration and Introduction of the Department of Agriculture and it is probably fair to say that he has permanently changed the face of this land more than any statesman we have produced; there are few of us, if any, who have not literally tasted the fruits of his labor. One stands a little in awe of such an achievement, as one stands in awe of the achievements of Burbank. Isn't it flying in the face of Nature, this creation of new fruits and flowers, this mixing up of the world flora, this transportation of plants from Africa and Asia to bloom among our native corn and sweet potatoes? Prometheus was tortured for precisely this kind of thing. It is doubtful, however, that anyone could find serious fault with the form of internationalism which Mr. Fairchild practised. The world was his garden, and

as a result we now enjoy some of its most exotic fruits and flowers without stirring from our homes. He represents science at its best, and not one of his contributions will explode in our hands or blow the roof off over our heads. (The object which looks like a hand-grenade, in the photograph of the author at his desk, is nothing more than a succulent fruit with which he has probably just returned from the Cannibal Isles or Cathay.)



David Fairchild

Mr. Fairchild's plant explorations over a period of more than a generation took him to almost every part of the known world, and, though the writing is not lively, the account of these explorations is worth reading for the actual adventure involved as well as for the light it throws on a romantic profession. The unwitting self-portrait is another reason for reading it. A man of passionate innocence and integrity, he has always been absorbed in his professional work to the exclusion of almost everything else. This is a career to be envied, for its devotion to the good and for the many fruits it has borne, including this autobiography of almost five hundred pages lavishly illustrated with excellent photographs of the author's garden.

## Off Stage and On

(Continued from page 4)

differs from other members of the audience in the privilege he has of printing his opinion in a public place. As a matter of fact, he is a good deal more temperate and judicious than most experienced theatergoers. Being the representative of a large public, he cannot indulge his personal whims freely: he must try to look at a play from the point of view of the public for whom it is intended. Being responsible first to the public and second to the theater, he is not a free agent. He cannot use the theater to promote his private career as a newspaper writer.

If theater people regard reviews with everything from terror to hatred, it is only fair to add that the reviewer regards the box office importance of criticism as a professional liability and something over which he has no control. As a critic he is under bond to put it out of mind altogether. Being interested in the art of the theater and the culture of the modern world, he must close his mind to the fact that what he writes in line of duty has repercussions in the business offices and personal exchequers of theater people. It is not the sort of influence he wants. He has never asked for it; he can console himself by believing

that it is recklessly overestimated by excitable people. I know that it is, for on several occasions I have tried to herald the merits of fine plays that the public has neglected; and the results have ranged from meager to negative. The public cannot be driven into the theater.

Whether general newspaper comment on the theater is criticism or reviewing is a point I have never settled in my own mind. We enjoy by tradition the imposing title of "dramatic critics." But our function on a daily newspaper is that of specialized reporting. The opening of a new play is news: we report the news. But since the news is largely bound up with the merit of the play, and the merit is a matter of opinion, our reporting is not only factual but opinionated. The reporting is not objective but subjective. The news value of the play usually depends upon our subjective evaluation of the play's quality. But I am not sure that the mere fact that we express an opinion gives us a right to the illustrious title of "critic." For criticism in the sense that Sainte-Beuve, Matthew Arnold, and Georg Brandes practised it involves a good deal more study of sources than we have time to do.

It is risky for a newspaper reviewer to lose the audience point of view. On one occasion Jed Harris and I agreed to take that risk, for both of us had

something to lose. I was to read the script and attend many of the rehearsals of his next production, although I was not to write my review until after the opening performance, as usual. In due course, I went to a rehearsal on a Sunday afternoon when the actors were sufficiently ready with two acts for a run-through. But that was the end of the experiment as far as I was concerned. The play was Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Sitting alone in the darkness and silence of the auditorium I was tremendously moved by what I saw, for it was my sort of play. As a matter of fact it was too close to my heart to risk experimenting with. When the first part of the rehearsal was over, and the actors went out for a bite to eat, I told Mr. Harris that I was still willing to experiment on a play I wanted to review with the exuberance of an amateur. I wanted to have it fresh and warm in mind at the moment I sat down to my desk and began searching for the crucial first line. After the opening performance had taken place and I had written my notice, I read several versions of the script with the emendations and changes that Mr. Wilder had made while the rehearsals were going on. That was an interesting study; it gave insight into performance. But I am bound to say that it did not change my impressions of what I had seen on the opening night, and furthermore, it did not seem worth discussing in the *Times*. It was technical evidence of preliminary workmanship. But the public had already seen the best of "Our Town" at the opening performance. In the case of "Our Town" I was quite content to be a reviewer.

But there is more than technical inquiry to criticisms. Criticism is also philosophy. It is the expression of a point of view, not merely towards an isolated play, but towards the world in general. It can throw light, not only on plays, but on life. It can create standards. It can stand for principles. It can be as much a form of art as the material it is discussing. Sometimes it is the kind of work Anatole France had in mind when he described it as the adventures of the soul among masterpieces. Masterpieces are rare, but they happen occasionally. That is the time when the first sentence pops spontaneously out of the midnight air, and the first-night review rolls off as slick as grease. Even the reader is in luck on those glowing occasions. He either chuckles or grows angry over destructive reviews; what he really likes is the salute and the serenade. The negative side of drama reviewing is a chore for everyone in and out of the theater, but the positive side puts everyone in radiant spirits.

The foregoing article by the dramatic critic of the New York Times will, in expanded form, constitute a chapter in "We Saw It Happen," a symposium by twelve correspondents of the *Times*, to be published by Simon & Schuster.

By the author of "Years of Grace."

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