

A Factual Account of Coleridge's Life

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: *a Biographical Study*. By E. K. Chambers. New York: Oxford University Press. 1939. \$7.

Reviewed by GEORGE McLEAN HARPER

TO appreciate this book one must take its subtitle quite literally, for it is concerned almost exclusively with the character and life of Coleridge, his health, his movements from place to place, his relations with people, his money affairs, his dealings with publishers, his literary and philosophical projects. It is a straightforward, extremely full account, with few digressions or comments. For certain important periods it is almost a day-by-day record, so abounding in details and repetitions that even a thoroughly sympathetic reader might wish to rid himself of Coleridge's society for a breathing spell. According to his contemporaries his endless talk was often sublime, but in a single volume of about 350 pages only a few short specimens of it could be given. The text is supported by a vast array of references to letters, anecdotes, and earlier biographies, collected and compared with admirable industry, so that we have here a summary of almost all previous studies of Coleridge's outward existence.

Sir Edmund Chambers has proved to be a most self-sacrificing biographer, content to deal with facts objectively, and in this limited capacity has succeeded admirably, for he has made a book that will be forever indispensable as a fund of information. He makes few attempts, except, one might say, in moments of forgetfulness, to deal with the sources, occasions, and qualities of Coleridge's poems or with the values of his political and philosophical views, or with his theological evolution. The book is not charming or exciting, as Coleridge himself was, and as an account of his life might be made without any departure from documentary evidence.

A painful impression is produced by the large number of "entanglements," the quarrels, tale-bearing, fault-finding, and misunderstandings between Coleridge and his friends, genial and affectionate man though he was. His ready acceptance of innumerable loans and gifts of money even from Lamb and Wordsworth, who could ill afford to make them, is another unpleasant feature. Idealists, reformers, poets, men of good will took him to their hearts wherever he went. They sheltered him, nursed him, and listened with amazement and patience to his talk. Then in most instances "estrangement" supervened—with Southey for persuading him to marry Sarah Fricker, with her because she was merely a good wife, with Thomas Poole and those other gen-

erous benefactors, the Wedgwoods, for no substantial reasons at all, with Charles Lloyd not without provocation, with Charles Lamb most unjustly, with the ever faithful, hospitable, self-sacrificing Wordsworths because of a false report and his annoying and dangerous infatuation with Mrs. Wordsworth's sister, Sara Hutchinson.

Another recurrent theme is his "projects" for poems, essays, text-books, biographies, and philosophical or theological treatises. Southey said to him, "You spawn plans like a herring." Readers who did not know the titles of his actual publications might easily become confused by his constant mentioning of works he intended to write, as if they were already written.

The evidence here assembled makes it plain that his instability and unhappiness were caused by opium and alcohol, but that his craving for these was occasioned by physical ailments. "This body," he said, "that does me grievous wrong."

There are several questionable points in this book. For example, why does Sir Edmund call Mary Evans "a distressed waif" when Coleridge met her in 1808? And when he mentions a letter from Dorothy Wordsworth written in April, 1813, about the failure of efforts at reconciliation with Coleridge, as "the last word of an historic friendship," is he not forgetting the long and happy trip in Belgium, Germany, and Holland made by her brother and Coleridge in company with her niece, Dora, in 1828?

Counsel of Despair

EAST OF EDEN. By I. J. Singer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

FOR at least half its length Mr. Singer's new novel is equal in style and naturalistic fidelity to anything of his we have seen. It is not only one more faithful evocation of the life of Polish Jewry, but it is a section of that life different from any he has thus far portrayed, except in some of his short tales in "The River Breaks Up." The Jewish population along the Vistula is, or perhaps was, a microcosm, abounding in a variety of types and personalities ranging from the élite to the pitied paupers who shoulder their packs from door to door. One of these last is Mattes Ritter, a ragged, luckless peddler, and even more luckless is his son, Nachman, whose harassed career we follow in these pages. Singer turns upon this ill-fated family that same clear and searching vision which illuminated the history of the Ashkenazis. This is the other side of the shield: hunger, helplessness, the dissolution of faith and codes, personal destruction. If one daughter is disgraced with an illegitimate child and another takes frankly to the streets, if Nachman must leave his brief attempt at schooling to



I. J. Singer

become a baker's apprentice, if the mother dies unattended in a hovel and the father is shamed by a slattern, all of these are parts of a pattern that spells out the logical fate of those who are economically and socially dispossessed. The ways in which Mr. Singer presents this history are familiar enough now; they have been discussed enthusiastically and at length with reference to his other works.

Aside from this, "East of Eden" does present a new and less satisfying aspect of Mr. Singer's work. About half way through the book, his Nachman Ritter emerges suddenly from obscurity and steps out upon a political stage. Poland has been occupied by the Germans, and Ritter becomes part of the underground Marxist agitation for freedom. His adventures in the movement make it clear to us, if not yet to himself, that he is the dupe of charlatans, for Mr. Singer shows us the Socialist leaders largely as a group of shoddy intriguers, who squabble for honors and know no interests but their own. Even when Ritter crosses the border to Russia, to seek the workers' Mecca, he finds only the same petty maneuvering for power, the same hunger and cruelty he had experienced in the Polish prisons, the same bureaucracy and the same oppressive conditions for the little men, the Ritters. Mr. Singer believes that there is no hope or salvation anywhere for the under-dogs, the little men. This note of despair closes the book. Not too convincingly, for one feels that Mr. Singer has stacked the cards, and dragged Nachman Ritter out of the logical orbit of his life to point this counsel of despair. Not that political commentary is outside the novelist's province. But Nachman was hardly the crucible in which to test the issues of this critical day; and in a harder character, Mr. Singer might have found the stuff to present a different answer to the question.

Advice to Authors

THE STORY WRITER. By Edith Ronald Mirrielees. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

IT is a little hard for a short-story writer to review a book on writing the short story. He may know—or think that he knows—why he does what he does. But so much of it is the result of practice and habit that he is often hard put to it to put his reasons into words. Now, there are two “puts” in one sentence, an obvious fault to be avoided by anyone seeking for clarity and euphony in style. I can see a blue pencil descending—excuse it please, Miss Mirrielees (unintentional rhymes should be eschewed by the novice). But wasn’t there a centipede who was getting along pretty well until somebody asked him which leg came in front of which? After that he got so tangled up in his own feet that he couldn’t walk at all. It isn’t your fault, Miss Mirrielees—it is just reading a book about writing. I can see it all now and I never should have been a writer. I never should have tried.

Let us take a long breath and start over again. This is a sensible book on story-writing with a remarkably sensible first chapter. It will not (italics, please) make a writer out of you in five easy lessons. Nor does it promise that. But it can and does point out certain remediable faults that are common in the work of a great many apprentice writers. It will tell you something about the uses of time in a story, something about characterization and dialogue, repetition and implication, something about what a story is, something about the viewpoint from which a story is written. These are valuable things to know, if you are capable of absorbing them from a book. If you are not capable of absorbing them from a book, you must get them some other way, and that isn’t Miss Mirrielees’s fault. But what you must not do is this. You must not read this book—or any other book—and then say to yourself, “Ah, now I see. I will write a story full of repetition and implication and, boy, will it be a masterpiece!” Miss Mirrielees doesn’t want you to do that. She is far too experienced and sensible. I am not particularly sensible but maybe I’m experienced, and I don’t want you to do it. And yet I can see you doing it just the same. I can see them doing it in squads and battalions—can’t you, Miss Mirrielees? They’re all over the parade-ground now, pounding away at repetition and implication on their typewriters. Would you mind passing me that little glass with the bromide in it—thank you very much.

Yes, it doesn’t hurt so much now—it hardly hurts at all. I can think about characterization, and there is hardly a twinge in the nerve. I could even write

a story if I could think of a plot. No I can’t do that yet. But ladies and gentlemen, there is just one point to be made. This book can help you if you are in a state to be helped. That is if you already have some knack for writing it may give you some hints worth taking. It is definite, it is not long-winded, and it makes some excellent points. It will not help you as much as personal criticism and advice from somebody like Miss Mirrielees. If in spite of Miss Mirrielees’s careful qualifications you take it as you would take a course in Yogi, it will not help you at all. For in the end it is your own laborious practice, your own deep-seated desire, and your own material, when you find it, that will make you a writer if you are going to be a writer, not any book, any course, or any single criticism. I am sorry to be dogmatic but that is the McCoy. The class is dismissed for the day.

A Double Love Story, Told with Imagination

THE CITY LIES FOUR-SQUARE. By Edith Pargeter. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

IN that extremely complex document, the British Order of Precedence, one finds the statement that Knights of the Star of India rank “with but after” Knights of the Bath. One may borrow this useful anomaly and say that “The City Lies Four-Square” ranks with but after “Berkeley Square” and “Peter Ibbetson”; it is not nearly so good as the latter, but it has the same sort of haunting charm. It is the story of Julian, a young man who, in preparation for his marriage, takes an old house, incredibly beautiful and incredibly cheap, and finds that it is possessed by a ghost, an appealing and timid shadow. When he was in the flesh, he had lost his beloved to a rival (as the result of a fantastic and not very convincing wager); and dying soon after, had determined to remain upon earth until she died, to stand unseen beside her while she lived, and to join her soul in the moment of her death. But she had no soul, or so it seemed; and now he is a lonely exile from both the worlds. He succeeds in making a friend of Julian, who tries to help him; the two parallel love stories gradually unfold. Defects in stage management arising from unconvincing motivation keep the book out of the front rank; but it is a wistful and lovely piece of imagination, in which the soul’s longing for its beloved and for heaven are exquisitely blended. And the whole tale is bathed in the stained-glass lights of the English medieval mystics. It is one of those books which certain readers will regard with a peculiar, personal affection.

The Girl From Botany Bay

THE STRANGE CASE OF MARY BRYANT. By Geoffrey Rawson. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by MARTIN S. CURTLER

GEOFFREY RAWSON has pieced together, from contemporary journals and other documents, a thrilling tale of hardships, courageously endured by certain members of the first settlement in Australia under Governor Phillip and, in particular, of the indomitable character of a woman convict who inspired a reckless flight from Port Jackson in an open boat.

Mary Broad—or Braund, as the author persists in calling her, although he says that “Boswell, who ought to know, always referred to her as Mary Broad”—had been convicted of petty theft and, in accordance with the harsh justice at the end of the eighteenth century, she was sentenced to be transported. The only evidence for Mr. Rawson’s explanation of her sentence, namely, that she had helped her sweetheart, Will Bryant, to escape from his imprisonment for smuggling, is to be found in a novel by Louis Becke and Walter Jeffery, entitled “A First Fleet Family.” The true nature of Mary’s crime has been disclosed by Professor Frederick A. Pottle in “Boswell and the Girl from Botany Bay,” and Geoffrey Rawson has, strangely enough, quoted, in an appendix, her crime and sentence as recorded in a Public Record Office document.

But these inconsistencies do not prevent the reader from being absorbed in a fast-moving yarn of far away and long ago. The author tells, without the disturbing element of undue embellishment, of an achievement unique in the annals of the sea. Although the privations during the voyage of the cutter from New South Wales to Timor resulted in the death of Mary Broad’s husband and two children, her own personal pluck defeated even the sadistic inhumanity of Captain Edwards—sent to find the Bounty mutineers and forced, in his turn, to reach Timor in an open boat—and brought her through the added trials of her forced return to England, to be finally pardoned owing to James Boswell’s unselfish interest in her case.

Geoffrey Rawson, then, has caused to live again the journals of plain seamen who did not realize that they were present at the creation of a new commonwealth and continent; he has recorded in a straightforward and restrained way man’s—or rather woman’s—perseverance in the face of heart-breaking obstacles, an irrational quality which belongs to no particular time or nationality. It is a worthy successor to such books as “The Floating Republic,” “Men against the Sea,” and Owen Rutter’s “Narratives of the Wreck of the Whale-Ship Essex.”