

## Art in America

### MODERN AMERICAN PAINTING.

By Peyton Boswell, Jr. (86 illustrations in full color selected from the Series on Contemporary Artists, published in *Life*.) New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1939. 200 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by AGNES RINDGE

A GREAT many people who know and understand painting have been content with the easy-going estimate that all American art is "either dull or derivative," and that is pretty much the verdict brought in by Paris and London after the two exhibitions of American art held abroad. Perhaps a book like this present volume, dedicated to "America's new school of native painting," can help to prepare us for the advent of a new cultural product in our midst—even to prepare a welcome for it.

The work is in no way pretentious or forbidding. The text is designed to support the plates. The difficulty of treating the subject with any sequence or show of justice has been felt by the author, for frequent references are made to the importance of such men as Henri, Glackens, Davies, and Luks, none of whom appears in the plates. Similar surprising omissions can be noted for contemporaries, too, but this makes all the more room for new men, and that is what the book is for.

The eighty-six plates, of which sixty-eight are by living artists, are not a complete coverage of all the masters we should consider, nor are the paintings illustrated always the best representations of their author's powers. But the characteristically American variety is here, and there is enough to provoke real interest. These plates were assembled originally for

that enterprising journal, *Life*. That a popular weekly magazine with over two million readers should include American art in this amount is impressive in itself. It is essential, however, to remember that just these plates were available and that they were made for very large-scale publication, because this does not produce fine color-plate printing. Nevertheless, for the general reader—and the book surely has in mind a large laymen's audience—the attraction of color in the presentation of painting and the very modest cost of so many examples should offset the disappointing items.

I began the book by dipping into the biographies at the back. These were prepared by Margit Varga of *Life* and are models of lively, objective directness. This wealth of material on living painters is the great contribution of the book. It is rather touching to note in these brief sketches how often the sale of the first painting, for whatever sum, has been the decisive factor in determining the artist's dedication to his career. The invaluable assistance of the Guggenheim fellowship appears again and again.

Mr. Boswell's text has the advantage of excellent topic headings. He gives some perspective to such themes as "The Eight of 1908," "The Armory Show," "Social Protest," "The Government in Art," and finally some sound advice in "To the Art Patron": "Liking is the first step toward true art appreciation. Art is meant to be liked and to be lived with. To buy an artist's work is the highest compliment you can pay his brush or his chisel." Many passages of too facile or too furious critical comment are hard to accept, such as "the nationalization of American art is today the most

significant art movement of the twentieth century."

The most uneven sections seem to be the earlier historical phases and the excessive adulation of the American Scene group. Mr. Boswell not only allows the eagle to scream pretty stridently here, but he does so at the expense of the great European contemporary movement.

One of the most successful chapters is the summary of the role of the Government in art. Mr. Boswell makes clear the very different functions of the work under the Treasury, based on regional competitions and not paid at relief wages, and the work undertaken by WPA. WPA artists have been singled out as the last outpost of government folly, but we read that at its height the Project has employed five thousand needy artists (not a large number among the millions), expending about three tenths of one per cent of the total amount spent for work relief. Perhaps this is not so very great a price to pay for keeping alive the idea that even an American has a right to be an artist.

Although charges can be made against the author of inconsistencies in his critical generalizations, it should be remembered that he has embarked upon a new, uncharted critical field. This is an enthusiastic, exploratory voyage. I enjoyed the trip quite as much as the exhilaration of disagreeing with passages in it.

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## Children of the Rugged Pioneers

THE CITY OF GOLD. By Francis Brett Young. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1939. 658 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THE City of Gold is Johannesburg, the miracle city born almost full-grown from the brow of the Witwatersrand, when gold was discovered there in 1884. In the last fifty-five years more than £1,000,000,000 worth of gold has been dug from the "Rand," and Johannesburg has become a beautiful and dignified metropolis and educational center. "The City of Gold," is in part a tale of the early, raw days of the community, when it seethed with fantastic speculation and political intrigue, with all the pyrotechnics of a frontier super-boom town; however, the title is misleading, for only the last one-fourth of this long novel deals with Johannesburg; earlier episodes in the history of the Transvaal engage most of the novelist's attention.

"The City of Gold" belongs to the



Janitor's Holiday, by Paul Sample. From "Modern American Painting."



From the jacket of  
"The City of Gold"

familiar type of historical novel in which the principal events, the setting, and some minor characters are drawn directly from actuality, but in which the principal family of characters is entirely fictional. The novel proceeds with the story of John Grafton, escaped English convict, and Lisbet, his Boer wife, whose somewhat tempestuous early life is magnificently told in one of Francis Brett Young's finest novels, "They Seek a Country." "The City of Gold" finds them in the calm of middle and old age, and is concerned principally with the strongly contrasted children of these rugged pioneers.

For once Mr. Young seems more occupied with history than with his characters, and as a result the novel often barely escapes dullness and ponderousness, especially for readers not particularly curious about South Africa. "The City of Gold" is a forthright, temperate novel which one will be glad to have read, but which offers no great excitement in the reading. For Francis Brett Young resolutely withholds all cinematic bribes to gain one's interest, and although the novel is crammed with potential melodrama, romance, and high tragedy, there is little sound and fury. A little heightening here, a little more emphasis there, and the novel would, superficially at least, have more vitality and a swifter pace. But the author treats with equal dispassionate calm the tedious intricacies of Boer and British politics, the great trek, the gold rush, and the Majuba massacre; the famous Jameson Raid (the climax of the action) is represented as an anti-climax—as it actually was. Nationalities as well as events are treated with scrupulous objectivity, and such background characters as Cecil Rhodes, Burgers, Paul Kruger, Barney Barnato, and Abe Bailey are drawn fairly and honestly. Those who are interested in the fascinating sub-continent (including certainly all readers of "They Seek a Country") will find "The City of Gold" a delight and a mine of information.

## A Humorist's Story

AUTOBIOGRAPHY. By A. A. Milne.  
New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1939.  
315 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

"ONE writes," says the famous creator of "When We Were Very Young," "in a certain sort of way because one is a certain sort of person; one is a certain sort of person because one has led a certain sort of life." Mr. Milne is most interested in revealing what influences in childhood, boyhood, and youth made him the particular kind of writer he became. Probably some people forget that he has been a versatile writer, a novelist, an essayist, a dramatist, and only in one of his phases a writer of children's books. Through it all, his view of life has been that of an essentially happy nature with a keen observation of people. His "Autobiography," one of the most readable I have recently encountered, recreates the world of his childhood and boyhood with zest.

To edit the *Granta* at Cambridge became Alan Milne's burning ambition, and he achieved it. Later, as a free-lance in London, he pictured himself as editor of *Punch*; and sure enough he did become the Assistant Editor, under Sir Owen Seaman. His account of his struggles in London to sell verse and prose, and of his experiences on *Punch*, reveals a high-hearted youth of much talent, whom the self-absorbed Harmsworth (one who owed Milne's father much) could hardly be bothered helping. But there is no malice in A. A. Milne. In fact he conveys the excitement of a literary existence in that period with an amused appreciation of such episodes. In 1913 the autobiographer married Sir Owen Seaman's god-daughter, Dorothy de Sélincourt. He was now getting top prices from *Punch* and altogether making about a thousand pounds a year.

The last part of the book, "Author," describes how, besides the writing of his plays, at a house in North Wales in a certain August, escaping from a large houseparty of friends, the "When We Were Very Young" verses were born in a summer-house through the media of an exercise-book and pencil. And incidentally, Milne explains his attitude toward children, sapient rather than sentimental. In the final pages intending dramatists will find some excellent analysis of

the pitfalls of playwriting and the way ideas for plays develop.

One lays down Mr. Milne's "Autobiography" with a liking for an honest man. He has always written what he wanted to write. When he has occasionally tried to do otherwise, he has found it impossible. Modest about his achievement, though naturally glad of his successes, he remains an individual whose sense of values seems in a healthy condition.

## Roused Rabble

TOMMY GALLAGHER'S CRUSADE.  
By James T. Farrell. New York:  
The Vanguard Press. 1939. 91 pp. \$1.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

FARRELL pauses for a while in his larger study of the O'Neills, to etch in briefly the portrait of a restless, deluded, hate-ridden figure who has been staring at us from small items in the papers, and from crowded corners on the streets. It had to be done, and by Farrell particularly, who knows his Tommy Gallaghers. For what if Studs Lonigan and Weary Reilley were roaming idle and wild today as they were ten years ago? Then their dissatisfactions were vague, their lawless appetites unchanneled. They were a potential force, but ran down like clocks. Today Tommy Gallagher, who is Studs in New York in 1939, is being wound more care-



James T. Farrell

fully. Somebody is telling him whose fault everything is. Somebody is teaching him that his race prejudices are gospel truth, and that he has to free America from the mysterious, malignant Jews who own everything and want to starve out the good Americans. He is being taught to sell his anti-semitic literature on the corners, to shout his slogans, leer at the crowds, break up liberal meetings.

It is not only not a pretty picture, it is definitely a sinister one. You will recognize its authenticity. Farrell has been writing about Tommy Gallagher for years, and he pierces with ease to the essential, confused currents that fill Tommy's mind. That is the really fearful aspect, the muddy compound of lies, dreams, ignorance, repressions, resentments, fears, that make the mental life of the Tommy Gallaghers. Into about ninety pages Farrell has packed not only a clear picture of our most dangerous contemporary symptom, but a wonderfully clear diagnosis as well. Size aside, this ranks with his best work.