

# A Two-Century Run

SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICA. By Esther Cloudman Dunn. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. 310 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by OTIS SKINNER

**A**T 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue in New York stands a substantial building devoted to department-store business. Nched in its northern wall is a marble bas-relief of William Shakespeare, a replica of the Stratford bust. This building is on the site of the old Booth's Theatre, built in 1867, and from its razed wall the medallion was reset in the new structure. It marks the end of an era in New York in which Shakespearean plays formed the principal part of its theatrical bill of fare.

Miss Dunn's "Shakespeare in America" covers this period with an informative illumination from the firstlings of Shakespeare on the American stage to his semi-renascence in the productions of Cornell, Evans, Gielgud, and Orson Welles. Miss Dunn's researches in the activities of actors noted for their Shakespearean performances are so complete it may be regretted that she closed her record before the nineteenth century's 80's. Later there were notable appearances of Edwin Booth, Lawrence Barrett, Barry Sullivan, James E. Murdoch, and E. L. Davenport; there was Tomasso Salvini, whose savage Othello startled American audiences, Ludwig Barnay and the German company from Saxe-Meiningen in a notable presentation of "Julius Caesar," the epoch-making productions of Irving and Terry and the scholarly Hamlet of Johnson Forbes-Robertson; nor must the single essay into Shakespeare by John Barrymore, whose "Hamlet" ran for one hundred nights in New York, be forgotten—it lingers in many a fond memory. That our best-loved tragedian, Edwin Booth, is dismissed in a few words leaves the reader with a sense of loss.

However, the author's catholicity and thoroughness in her subject is the cause for vast satisfaction. The book is far from being a mere theatrical record, although, as William Shakespeare was first of all of the theater and for the theater, despite his eminence as our greatest English poet, he was made most familiar to the American public through stage representation. It was inevitable that the theater, sprung into England's favor at the Restoration, after years of condemnation of its practitioners (they being classed as "rogues and vagabonds"), should find its first ac-

ceptance in America in the Virginia Colony among our early "aristocrats." From thence its slow progress was ploughed through stubborn opposition northward, through Quaker prejudice in Pennsylvania and the lesser intolerance of New York and, at long last, through the outraged prejudice of stiff-necked Puritanism in Boston.

New York's tolerance was not always easy-going. As the Revolution grew nearer, detestation of anything British became rampant. It focused its venom on the Chapel Street Theatre in 1766 as the work of "Britain and



Indians in Shakespearean costume at the time of the second Seminole war, in Florida.

the devil," stopped a performance, drove the audience to the street, and set fire to the building. Nevertheless, New York audiences had had their first taste of Theater and liked it. "In the very teeth of war two real theaters were built and maintained, hospitable to many Shakespearean plays." Acting in these early times must have been a very crude exhibition of posturing and elocution. Miss Dunn quotes Captain Graydon's criticism of Hallam: "His declamation was either mouthing or ranting . . . He could tread the stage with ease and had all the tricks and finesse of his trade."

By the 1830s greater refinement and subtlety had given artistry to the American theater. The period was enriched by visitors from overseas: the Keans, Edmund (of whose Shylock Coleridge said it was "like reading Shakespeare by a flash of lightning") and his son, Charles; Charles Kemble and his daughter, the fascinating

Fanny, and later, William Charles Macready. One of the earliest of the comedians who left a distinguished mark in the field of Shakespearean acting was James H. Hackett. His Falstaff in "Henry IV" broke away from time-worn comic acting. Of him we learn that he tried to "get inside the skin of the character himself, to live him and act him as he was magnificently conceived in the brain of Shakespeare. His acting differs from that of conventional rendition, a gesture here, a drop of the voice there, a step forward in another place, according to set tradition."

To the influence of Shakespeare on the thought and purposes of American culture and its academic aspect many pages are given, and to the sentiments of distinguished writers who found inspiration in the words of the Bard—Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Alcott, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and others—while our nation's leaders from Washington to Lincoln absorbed his golden words and quoted him at length in writings and public utterances. To orators like John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and Henry Ward Beecher, Shakespeare was a gold-mine. A revealing phase in this book is the story of Abraham Lincoln's indebtedness to Shakespeare for his primal education:

He seems not to have known anything about Shakespeare till his early twenties in the New Salem days. . . . There is a rightness, considering Lincoln's early provincial beginnings and circumscribed existence, in the oral nature of his acquaintance. Though he read the plays avidly he began by "hearing" them. He never lost the sense of their existence as rhetoric, whether on or off the stage. In his effort to meet single-handed the gigantic business of becoming educated, Lincoln discovered that "reading aloud" was the best way of impressing what was read on his mind. . . . This oral reading was clearly not for the entertainment of the listener but to give Lincoln, himself, the full depth and vibrancy of the lines. In his most intimate circle he would recite such speeches as Richard II's, commencing:

"For God's sake let us sit upon the ground."

In his diary of August, 1863 Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, wrote, "He read Shakespeare to me, the end of 'Henry VI' and the beginning of 'Richard III,' till my eyelids caught his considerate notice and he sent me to bed." Lincoln frequently visited performances of Shakespeare in Washington. On two occasions he wrote to Hackett asking about points in the acting of the plays.

Miss Dunn's work is a welcome one, valuable alike to students of Shakespeare and lovers of the theater.

BOOK PREVIEW\*

# The Power of the Press

BY SIMEON STRUNSKY



Simeon Strunsky

**S**HORTLY after the 1936 election it began to be heard that President Roosevelt had won his tremendous victory with only twenty per cent of the newspapers on his side. In the course of a few weeks the estimate of Mr. Roosevelt's press support in the late campaign was cut down by his more ardent supporters to fifteen per cent. One quizzical paragrapher saw the time close at hand when Mr. Roosevelt would be the victor in 1936 with only ten per cent of the press behind him, and ultimately he might yet win the greatest popular triumph in the history of the Presidency against "the virtually united opposition of the American press," or something of the kind.

The facts were by no means so hard on the newspapers of America. In the whole country Mr. Roosevelt in 1936 had between thirty-five and forty per cent of the newspaper circulation. In the fifteen largest cities he had thirty per cent of the circulation; excluding New York, the Roosevelt circulation may have been nearer twenty-five per cent. On the other hand, the small town and country dailies and weeklies were evenly divided between Mr. Roosevelt and his opponent.

The fact remains, of course, that in the 1936 election President Roosevelt polled a vote almost exactly in inverse proportion to his newspaper support. In the nation he had sixty-three per cent of the votes and between thirty-five and forty per cent of the newspaper circulation. In the fifteen leading cities he had seventy per cent of the vote and thirty per cent of the newspaper circulation. The city figures are even more impressive if we omit New York City, where the Roosevelt and the Opposition circulations were about equal. In the other cities the ratio was four to one against Mr. Roosevelt. In some cities it was much higher. In one or two cities Mr. Roosevelt had no newspaper support at all. Yet his majorities everywhere ranged from decisive to crushing. Whatever

the power of the press might be, it certainly was not the power to command the earthquake and reverse the tides.

It was a commonplace until the second Roosevelt election in 1936 that this is a Republican country. Beginning with the Harding election in 1920, when woman suffrage added sixty per cent to the electorate, this normal Republican margin was usually estimated at five million votes in an aggregate major-party vote of thirty-five to forty million. It would mean that the normal Republican vote was close to sixty per cent of both parties, and this would be not far from the Republican share of the newspaper circulation of the country as we have appraised it above. A close correspondence, however, between Republican votes and Republican newspaper circulation is not to be explained by the reason commonly advanced. It was not Republican newspaper ascendancy that produced Republican election majorities but the other way about. Republican popular majorities gave the Republican party its notable preponderance in the press. The newspapers did not shape the American people but shaped themselves to the people. In a normal Republican nation we had a normal Republican press, even as in the overwhelmingly Democratic South we have an overwhelmingly Democratic press. The press adapts itself to the general pattern. If ever the Democratic party takes over the majority status enjoyed by the Republican party from 1864 to 1928, ultimately a permanent majority of the American press will be found on the Democratic side.

If this statement of the interaction between public opinion and press leaves little of the so-called power of the press, there is nothing we can do about it as long as we think of power in the sense of domination. It simply is not true that the press molds public opinion as it sees fit, swinging the mobile vulgus hither and thither according to whim, or party interest,

or class interest, or the newspaper owner's individual profit. This doctrine attained an enormous vogue after the World War, for it was a generation which grew inordinately fond of the word Propaganda, and men cited propaganda as the irresistible force which shaped everything of which they happened to disapprove. The three Republican landslides beginning with the 1920 Presidential election were explained by Democrats and radicals as the fruit of Republican propaganda exercised through a controlled press. In the same temper the Roosevelt landslide in 1932 was explained by the leading Republican newspaper of the country as due largely to the "smearing" of President Hoover by the publicity director of the Democratic National Committee. In other words, when we lose an election the hostile press is a tremendous power for evil. When we win an election in the face of a hostile press it shows that the power of the press is a sham.

What the successive landslides after the World War actually show is that the power of the press has its very distinct limitations. The thundering majorities in five Presidential elections were determined by great mass movements acting under the spur of major forces, material or emotional, in which the newspapers and the propagandists were like chips on the crest of the wave. In 1920 it was a violent popular reaction against the World War. In 1924 it was "Coolidge prosperity" superimposed on a murderous Democratic feud which tore the party in two. In 1928 it was the revolt of Protestant America against a Catholic nominee on the Democratic ticket. In 1932 the Republicans were over-

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