

LITERARY STEREOSCOPE

HENRY F. PRINGLE

ATENDENCY to decide regarding the immediate past has long been part of the American credo. All of us remember how we roared with laughter at the snapshots of Uncle Tom and Aunt Nellie, taken on their honeymoon in 1905 at Niagara Falls. How could any man wear so absurd a checked overcoat as Uncle Tom or hide behind such luxuriant mustaches or beam so protectively at his apparently blushing bride? And how could any girl squeeze herself into such tight corsets and wear such a dowdy dress?

The American credo had infinite reverence for history which dated back fifty or one hundred years and nothing but ridicule for the immediate past. The biographer or historian who breathed a word against the impeccable characters of Washington, Jefferson, or Lincoln was a cad and a sensationalist. If, by ill luck, he was a teacher he was more than likely to lose his job. So Washington remained as spotless as in the oily canvas of Parson Weems, and Jefferson, although a Democrat and thus open to suspicion, was rarely criticized either. These were the honored dead, the honored great. But all the figures of the past two or three decades were absurdly funny, whether publicists or writers or merely Uncle Tom and Aunt Nellie. So were their manners and their clothes and the houses in which they lived. We thanked our gods that we had not lived when they did. We were smug and self-satisfied that we had escaped life in their absurd era.

Within the last few years a shift in attitude may be discerned. The change is not yet complete. We are still amused. David L. Cohn, in his vastly entertaining and probably important history of Sears, Roebuck & Co. and its mail order catalogues,* is still half convinced that only yesterday is pretty ludicrous. Why else would he have called his book, at least partly in sarcasm, "The Good Old Days?" There is also a touch of the



Painting from life by Jo Davidson
David L. Cohn may give way to a snicker now and then, but he is a good historian.

old derision in certain of his chapter headings. But "The Good Old Days" is, all in all, an honest and objective account of an extraordinary era of extraordinary changes in American life, the era between 1905 and 1935. Mr. Cohn may give way to a snicker now and then, but he is a good historian.

Good historians of the immediate past are a new development. Mark Sullivan was probably the first. It is greatly to be deplored that Mr. Sullivan did not sit down at the start and carefully plan the long volumes which began with "The Turn of the Century" and ended, years later, with "The Twenties." They are rambling and badly organized and yet filled with gold. Objective writing of current history began in the late twenties and such editors as Henry Mencken of *The American Mercury* and Harold Ross of *The New Yorker* encouraged the trend in their magazines. The books came later and there were many of them. Frederick L. Allen in his "Only Yesterday" and his recently published "Since Yesterday" added intelligent appraisal and analysis to the mere accumulation of facts. A salutary result of the magazine articles and the books

has been less raucous merriment regarding Uncle Tom and Aunt Nellie and far more information regarding their era and their customs.

A suspicion dawns that we ourselves are in no position to toss stones. Such a suspicion arises from a careful reading of "The Good Old Days." Mr. Cohn includes a chapter on the books which were bought by the patrons of Sears, Roebuck and he has some fun over emphasis on the virginity and purity of the females of the era so grossly misnamed the "Gay Nineties." Daphne was a good girl with limbs, not legs. Hilary was one of God's noblemen with virility but no base thoughts. But let our laughter be gentle. For have we not our Will Hays and our censorship of motion pictures? And is there a film in which there is not a Daphne, although with legs and not limbs? And is not Clark Gable actually Hilary in a more modern form?

SO much of history is to be found in commonplace things. Mr. Cohn was on the Sears, Roebuck staff for several years. He knew the mail-order business. He had access to all of the catalogues of the company and he has made the most of this treasure house of American manners and customs. "By your eyebrow pencils, your encyclopedias and your alarm clocks shall ye be known," writes Sinclair Lewis in a friendly foreword to "The Good Old Days." Mr. Cohn offers vastly more evidence. He tells us how to know Uncle Tom and Aunt Nellie by the books they read, by the furniture they bought, by the hair goods which disguised their fading beauty, by their undergarments, their medicines, and their tombstones. Mr. Cohn has legitimate fun in his chapter, "The Bird on Nellie's Hat," over the contraptions perched on top of the pompadours of the day. Let him suppress his merriment, however, and gaze at the strange little saucers of daisies now worn. But I begin to sound like a gaffer of 1905, myself.

Twice each year, the author writes, "heavy trains roll out of Chicago laden

**THE GOOD OLD DAYS.* By David L. Cohn. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940. 597 pp., with index. \$3.75.

with 7,000,000 catalogues weighing a trifle under three pounds each, making a total weight of 21,000,000 pounds." There are different editions for different sections of the nation. Ice skates and ski suits are not offered to Southern patrons and farm machinery differs according to crop requirements. Sears, Roebuck began in 1886 and, with Montgomery, Ward & Co., its main competitor, has had a profound influence on American life. Mr. Cohn limited himself to the years between 1905 and 1935. In each of those years, however, at least one catalogue was published with 1,000 or 1,500 pages of data on the needs and desires of the American people. The mail order houses were run by merchants who gave their customers what they wanted. They gave the ladies aigrettes, torn out of living birds with hideous cruelty, until the Audubon Society and the Federal Government intervened. They gave the gentlemen revolvers and pistols. They supplied, in due course, contraceptives.

THE mail order catalogue was "The Nation's Wishbook" and its arrival on Main Street or the farm in a day before radio and motion pictures, was a momentous event. Its potency was still great during the World War. The late Julius Rosenwald, head of Sears, Roebuck, accompanied War Secretary Newton D. Baker on a visit to the front. Mr. Rosenwald took four huge packing cases with him and these were distributed among the hospitals in France. The catalogues in them were eagerly read by the wounded men of the A. E. F. For in their pages were pictures of fishing tackle and guns and machinery of a land so far away and so dear. The mail order catalogue is still potent, but it has changed. Today it is streamlined. I have a copy of the 1940 Sears, Roebuck issue in front of me. On the cover is a picture of an extremely pretty girl. The first pages, once given over to buggies and harness, are now devoted to fashions.

The changes of thirty years have been infinite. Birth control is no longer a mystery, but is practiced everywhere. It is impossible, as Mr. Cohn points out, "to evaluate the social, economic, and political changes that will be wrought in America in the second half of the twentieth century as the result of the constantly falling birth rate." He cites, however, a few possibilities. The number of old people in comparison with young will greatly increase. And so "the demand will be for more armchairs and fewer layettes; more walking sticks and fewer tennis rackets . . . more woolen underwear and less silk underwear . . ." It is a dreary prospect, but one

THIS WEEK

BOOKS REVIEWED

	PAGE
THE GOOD OLD DAYS By David L. Cohn <i>Reviewed by Henry F. Pringle</i>	3
THE AMERICAN STAKES By John Chamberlain <i>Reviewed by Lindsay Rogers</i>	5
THE HAMLET By William Faulkner <i>Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét</i>	7
LOOK BACK ON HAPPINESS By Knut Hamsun <i>Reviewed by Gosta Larsson</i>	18
STALIN'S KAMPF Edited by M. R. Werner <i>Reviewed by Frederick L. Schuman</i>	10
STALIN: CZAR OF ALL THE RUSSIAS By Eugene Lyons <i>Reviewed by Freda Utley</i>	11
THE COURSE OF AMERICAN THOUGHT By Ralph H. Gabriel <i>Reviewed by T. V. Smith</i>	16

FEATURES

EDITORIAL	12
SATURDAY REVIEW PORTRAIT Jules Romains, by Gilbert Highet.....	14
NEWS PICTURES By Robert Disraeli.....	19
LITERARY I. Q.	7
THE CRIMINAL RECORD.....	32
A READER'S ALMANAC By Virginia Kirkus.....	33
THE NEW BOOKS.....	31
DOUBLE CROSTICS No. 315.....	37
TRADE WINDS.....	38

COVER DESIGN BY LOUIS ANSBACHER

NEXT WEEK

CHAD HANNA By Walter E. Edmonds <i>Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét</i>
THIS UNBALANCED WORLD By Elmer C. Bratt <i>Reviewed by David Cushman Coyle</i>
I'M FROM MISSOURI By Eugene R. Page
HAMLET'S POLITICS By Jacques Barzun

THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, published weekly by the Saturday Review Company, Inc., 420 Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y. Harrison Smith, President; James Nelson, Vice-President; Heinz Norden, Treasurer; Amy Loveman, Secretary. Subscription, \$4 a year; \$4.50 in Canada; \$5 in other countries. At least 3 weeks' notice required for changes of address; both old and new addresses must be given. Printed in U. S. A. Vol. XXI, No. 24, April 6, 1940. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

of the virtues of "The Good Old Days" is that its author does not shrink from unpleasant conclusions.

The decade from 1905 to 1915 was a gentler one. Cosmetics were relatively unknown, although today every high school girl uses rouge and lipstick, and Sears, Roebuck gets its due share of her business. It may be questioned that Mr. Cohn is wholly correct is his gloomy prediction of a boom in armchairs. For today's accent is on youth. Three principal tendencies, he writes, may be discerned in the dress and fashion sections of the catalogues in the passage of thirty years. Women dress to appear younger. There has been a trend toward simplicity. The clothes of the middle class are now almost identical with those of the well to do. Too, this is an age of frankness. The female form may still be divine, but it is ever present. Photographs of girls in girdles and brassieres appear in the best magazines. They appear in the catalogues of Sears, Roebuck.

Styles in undergarments have changed. Styles in merchandizing have also changed. The mail order house played an important part, Mr. Cohn tells us, in killing the old doctrine of *caveat emptor*. The customer who went to a store could inspect and squeeze and examine his purchase and if he was fooled it was his own fault. He could not, however, examine a mail order article until he had bought it. So the mail order house promised him his money back if he was not satisfied and its goods lived up to the promises of the catalogue. Most important among the changes in merchandizing was the advent of installment buying. In 1910 Sears, Roebuck was viewing with alarm the scheme for mortgaging the future for the joys of today. Even automobiles were sold for cash alone. Five years later all this had changed. Pianos were being offered on part time. Today "anything and everything"—as long as the order exceeds ten dollars — can be had "on easy payments."

"The Good Old Days" is an important contribution to the history of the immediate past. At times Mr. Cohn seems to wander somewhat far from the pages of the Sears, Roebuck catalogues and to offer too many observations, perhaps, on the political and economic problems of the era about which he writes. In the main, though, his excursions are illuminating. He has written a thoughtful, intelligent, and also an amusing book.

Henry F. Pringle, journalist and biographer, is author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning life of Theodore Roosevelt and "The Life and Times of William Howard Taft."

Hints to the “Liberal Intellectuals”

LINDSAY ROGERS

IN one of the most fascinating books I have ever read—“The Endless Adventure”—the late F. S. Oliver (best known in the United States for his brilliant essay on Alexander Hamilton) recounted the successes and failures of various statesmen who had attempted the task of governance in different countries and at different times. He found no exception to this rule: that “it is impossible to play a statesman’s part—to build institutions, to wage wars, to guide, encourage, and firmly hold a Cabinet, in a word, to govern—unless the would-be leader understands the hard nature of facts and will endure the drudgery of grappling with them.”

Too frequently our modern politicians have seemed to view their problems through a glass, darkly. That was spectacularly the case with Neville Chamberlain before and at Munich. Indeed he seemed to wish to darken the glass for he sought counsel not from the Foreign Office but from the Chief Industrial Adviser to His Majesty’s Government and thus made possible the cruel gibe that Munich was a case of the blind leading the blind. But when issues are talked or written about and do not have to be acted upon, viewing them only from a distance and never close up is not catastrophic. On the contrary, for eloquence bogs down in its flights when it must pause to consider too many details. In “The American Stakes”* Mr. John Chamberlain does not get so close to his problems that he can count the hairs in their nostrils, as the saying goes. Perhaps one reason is that, based in part on book reviews and magazine articles, the volume is only moderately well knit. Pages—for example, those in the *New Republic’s* anniversary number on Herbert Croly and his “Promise of American Life”—seemed to be lugged in.

Mr. Chamberlain was closer to grappling with facts when in his “Farewell to Reform” he doubted whether what is now described as the “pro-

gram of the liberal intellectuals” held out much promise. He was then, to use his present description, a “*pro-tem*, hand-me-down Marxian.” Since that time, in a company that was neither insignificant nor undistinguished, he has travelled toward Damascus and has seen both darkness and light. Some roads that might possibly lead to freedom are now “blocked”: for example, communism, anarchism, state socialism, and guild socialism. He wants to “pull our social philosophers back from the all-or-nothing brink upon which they have been teetering for years.” He thinks this approach is “shoddy tinsel.” He wants to “hymn the virtue of a mixed economy, an eternally pluralistic economy” which will achieve “a permanently working dynamic balance.” I think I am for this even though I do not quite know what it means.

Before he reaches this conclusion, Mr. Chamberlain expounds his theory of the state. He borrows his phraseology from one Murray Godwin, and suggests that “the state was created as a racket, with the major ‘take’ from the land going to the warrior gangster who could hang on to the political means of getting wealth away from those who used the economic means of bringing the wealth into existence.” In its present form the racket can be “strict” or “limited.” Russia and Germany are “strict” rackets. The Western democracies are “limited” rackets. They face problems “involving the *sorting of the take*.” Thus, “in a country of many origins and groups, the state tends to lose its originally clear instrumental function and *mutates* into a fulcrum to be fought over by rival groups.” What John Strachey called the “bridge-heads” of peace—civil liberties and the standard of living—cannot be defended save by “a coalition of groups or parties firmly grounded in limited-racket, or states-as-broker theory.” From this point of view the particular group coalition that has won an election is not the important problem. “The real test is this: ‘Has the way been left open for *my* group to fight for what it conceives to be its rights?’



Woodcut courtesy “Common Sense.”
John Chamberlain has travelled toward Damascus and has seen both darkness and light.

If the way is still open, then we have democracy.”

With these premises well stated Mr. Chamberlain glances at “the sorting of the take” under the Roosevelt administrations. He thinks that they have “certainly established a social service base line which no non-fascist party will ever dare remove,” but he is no indiscriminating apologist for the New Deal. He speaks of its “final fuzziness of aim” and its “confusion,” but he does not realize that these are extremely serious matters. “Politics,” he remarks, “is the art of one thing at a time.” But politics is also the art of postponing a second thing which will cancel out the first thing. Moreover, it is the art of not doing too many things in too short a time and thus avoiding both apoplexy at the center and anemia at the circumference. Finally, politics is an art whose practitioners should not be excused for badly splotched canvases on the ground that their ideals were noble and their intentions high.

The trouble with “the liberal intellectuals”—they might just as well be called “intellectual liberals”—in whose camp Mr. Chamberlain now finds himself, is that they have sought to abbreviate their drudgery. They have been reluctant to grapple with the facts before they proposed action. To borrow President Roosevelt’s figure of speech, a quarterback does try one play and if it does not succeed he tries another play. But a good quarterback makes his choices only after a careful calculation of the strengths of the opposing team, the capabilities of his own team mates, the score, etc., and—in professional football at least—what will please the spectators.

*THE AMERICAN STAKES. By John Chamberlain. New York: Carrick & Evans. 1940. 320 pp., with index. \$2.75.