

## Letters to the Editor: *History and the Tradition: A Code for D. C. Fans*

### Clio's Mansions

SIR:—Mr. Crane Brinton remarks in your issue of January 6th that "Mr. Allan Nevins never tires of pointing out" that men writing in the professional historical tradition "lose touch with the general reader almost as completely as if they were specialists confined to a technical jargon, like mathematicians or chemists."

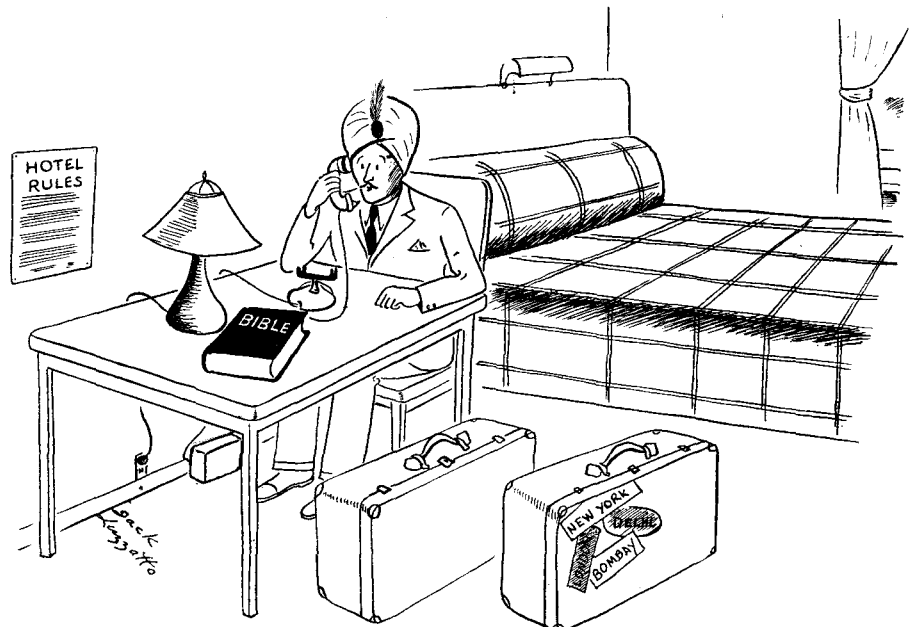
What I never tire of pointing out is that history is a mansion with many rooms; and that it contains a place for the erudite specialist, for the coldly scientific historian, for the interpretive writer, for the historian of imagination (when held in check by fact), and for many other figures. There is a place for the monograph-writer, who is essential to historical progress; a place for the dryasdust assembler of facts; a place for the historical philosopher. I have good-naturedly protested against the contempt with which erudite authors of monographs and review-articles in our academic seats continually treat those lay historians who write books which combine sound scholarship with high literary quality. That is, I have protested against the deep-rooted fashion among academic teachers and scholars of treating any book which possesses imagination, dramatic quality, and literary grace as necessarily superficial, and which makes a merit out of writing baldly and badly. A year ago, feeling that this fashion had a paralyzing effect upon academic writing, I pointed out that the most important historical works published in 1938 came from non-academic pens. It could now be pointed out that in 1939 none of the academic group of historians in the American field published a book comparable in value with Sandburg's "Lincoln," Pringle's "Taft," Canby's "Thoreau" (as a study in cultural history), or Hendrick's "Statesmen of the Lost Cause." To point this out is not to impugn the value of a good monograph or review-article, or to deny that a place—and a very important place—exists for the scholar who is too intent upon a scientific statement to care anything for literary quality. Arguing for tolerance in the one direction, I would not be intolerant in another.

ALLAN NEVINS.

New York City.

### In Reply to Will Irwin

SIR:—Regarding the Double-Crossics, I am deeply in sympathy with Mr. Will Irwin, but I think he does not plan his code of ethics quite right. The DC's are primarily for entertainment and not a religious ritual. I went through the stage Mr. Irwin describes, when I felt like a criminal if I so much as looked in a dictionary.



"Will you please send up a Koran?"

But I now see more clearly, and I would far rather seek an answer in a reference book than leave a DC unsolved.

That I have never done. I have solved every one of Mrs. Kingsley's puzzles in your paper and every one in her seven books. My conscience is satisfied if I find I *cannot* go farther without a word I need, to look for it in a book.

No one can *guess* Scheherazade's Sultan, or make up the name of the goat that nursed Zeno. But after I've honorably tried to get along without it, I cheerfully hasten to my reference shelf, and track down the beast. To do so means the greatest good to the greatest number, and only a natural born martyr should have a guilty pang.

When one can do a whole DC without a needed reference to a needed authority, it is not a sign of excessive gray matter, but because Mrs. Kingsley happened to make that one without Moses's grandmother or Siegfried's sword. It all lies between you and your conscience. If you have really used every ounce of brain you possess to go further, you are justified in opening a helpful book. But if you look things up because of indolence or to hurry the game along, you are an unworthy member of Mrs. Kingsley's clan.

CAROLYN WELLS.

New York City.

### "Hereditary American Fortunes"

SIR:—The judgment passed on Gustavus Myers in *The Saturday Review* of January 6 prompts me as a personal friend and deeply indebted reader of Mr. Myers to ask space for this dissenting view.

The judgment is in the review by William O. Scroggs of Mr. Myers's "The Ending of Hereditary American Fortunes." Mr. Scroggs says that the author "is apparently warped by a soul-searing hatred for people who have accumulated large fortunes," and that his book "is largely propaganda and muckraking, a smearing of the 'haves' . . ."

Muckraking, of course, has been justified by its fruits and is no longer a term of reproach, although here applied with that intention. But the other criticisms involve facts on which, I believe, any reviewer should know better. In his studies of the great American fortunes, Tammany Hall, the Supreme Court, and other first-rank subjects, Mr. Myers performed the bravest of pioneering—not as a warped propagandist but with a disinterested accuracy which has stood up unchallenged. It has been, in fact, the foundation for libraries of later books. That record should exempt Mr. Myers from accusations of being a rabble-rouser.

GEORGE BRITT.

New York City.

(Mr. Scroggs properly passed judgment on the book under review, not on the author's previous work.—Ed.)

### "It Doesn't Make Sense"—Cont'd

SIR:—The other mystery cliché, and Mr. McElroy of Chicago can fill two pages of your valued Letters to the Editor space with it if he chooses, is "I don't like it"—usually uttered by sleuth as case gets thicker and thicker. Sometimes it's "I don't like it". As for me—I don't like it.

JUDGE LYNCH.

New York City.

## BOOK PREVIEW\*

## POETESS OF PASSION

BY JENNY BALLOU

FROM the crescent beach a wayfarer may have stopped on that hot summer night, dazed, to see the naptha launch transformed into a legendary barge. There, under the dangling lanterns, stood the Junoesque Julie Opp Faversham, Goddess of Liberty. Thirteen girls in Grecian draperies formed a patriotic tableau of the original states of the Union. And, as the cool salt waves of the Sound carried the fleet to shore on the strains of "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," Ella Wheeler Wilcox, American poetess of passion, alighted, followed by her costumed attendants, the good neighbors of Short-Beach-on-the-Sound.

As undisputed queen of her court, she had chosen Julie for Goddess of Liberty; but Ella herself was all the goddesses she had ever heard of, as she was all the heroines she wrote about. In her fluttering chiffons she must have seemed to herself the first incarnation of Cleopatra. This was not Long Island Sound on a Fourth of July at the close of the nineteenth century, A. D. It was the ancient Nile; and there on the sands, her lover awaited her. What if her Antony was seen by the world in the guise of a silver merchant, tipping the scales not far from two hundred pounds?

To her eyes, to which the russet rocks off the Sound were pink, to her vision, before which all history and all personal experience were finally to be seen through yellow journalistic glasses, Robert was all the ancient heroes rolled into one. Among his contemporaries—for though he did not, like his wife, write for publication, he *was* a contemporary—whose lanuginous tufts made Rip Van Winkle seem by comparison simply unshaven, his face, with the sole ornament of twirled moustachios, must have appeared denuded, almost defenseless. And to modern eyes, unschooled in the tonsorial experiments of that period before Freud, when the saying went that to be kissed by a man without a moustache was like eating an egg without salt, Robert,

from his photographs, gives the impression of a documentary desperado, corrected by the benign expression of his glance. But there he was, with his fine voice, and direct eyes, always solid behind Ella—more than her Antony.

Their child lived only a few hours; but did not the Sunday supplement beauty, Maurine, whose mother had read Ella Wheeler's "Maurine," come and smile to her, and was this not a child of their own, then, smiling? All the girls in the Maurine Club in Chicago were her children; and the thousands upon thousands who read in her poems, syndicated by Hearst, that "Love Rules Triumphant" and "Life Is Eternal." And those too, whom she took to that warm, heaving bosom, so graphically described in her "Poems of Passion" and comforted for the loss of their loved ones, for their gray hairs, for being out of a job, they too were her children. And the bereaved mothers she consoled during the first World War, they were her children too, those for whom she wrote in her New York *Journal* column that Death was the most loyal, the last, the best lover of all, the never-failing friend. Later, when she went to the Front herself, to France, obeying an astral message from Robert, who had "passed on to a larger and more wonderful plane"—were not the boys to whom she ministered and read her oft-quoted poems, her sons? Might not any one of them be her own son who had not lived to die for democracy?

Her own parents had been her children, when she took on, with the burden of her success, that of being a daughter twice over. From the beginning she had helped the family on that bleak Wisconsin farm, with the verse that flowed so easily, far too easily, from her exalted temperament. For Ella Wheeler Wilcox belonged to that buoyant race to whom Mark Twain would have reared his heathen statue to Energy; though she ended by saying that all the optimistic props she had given others failed her. But while the show lasted, she awakened each morning reborn.



Ella Wheeler Wilcox

No matter what happened the day before, there was always with the dawn—for she was a morning person—the renewed "undertone of rapture," there was always "the balm." Each summer she wrote her friends that this was the best summer of all. Like Mark Twain, and like Jack London, she lived in the moment, safely close to the surface. Her adolescent dreams, excepting for one thing—she was possessed of the same passion for fame and adulation that consumed Marie Bashkirtseff—her longings were entirely those of the average American girl; lovely dresses, travel, feminine accomplishments, summers by the sea, the compelling lover. And she wanted everybody else to have everything and to be happy and beautiful. In "Being Alive" she expostulated, with more truth than prose, that "in every thousand people who are living on this earth, not more than one is alive."

She herself was avid for life. Would she ever make up for those lonely nights on the farm, when she pinned her curtains against the moon's rays, crying: "Another beautiful night of youth wasted and lost"? She was not content with what Robert Frost and the Greeks call samples of life; she wanted big slices of it—with the loud pedal on. She wanted, like Hemingway's bullfighter hero, to live "all the way up." And she balked at the woman's role of waiting with clasped fingers for life to come; she ran eagerly toward it, as far as a woman can.

Hankering, like London, for "life" above art, she confused both mortally by separating them—as though the one did not flower from the other. She

\*The Saturday Review presents a condensation from the opening section of Jenny Ballou's "Period Piece: the Life and Time of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," to be published January 30 by Houghton Mifflin.