

BOOK PREVIEW*

History Out of a Catalogue

BY DAVID L. COHN

ONLY thirty years ago this country still preserved its early pattern of an agrarian economy, despite the stupendous growth of industrialism and urbanism after the Civil War. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were still far more people in the country than in the cities: forty-six millions living in rural territory as against thirty millions in urban territory. And country folk were evidently readers of books.

One reason, perhaps, that reading played an important part in their lives was because men and women stayed or had to stay largely at home and limit their activities to a narrow compass. In 1900, there were only eight thousand registered automobiles in the United States as opposed to millions of bicycles and buggies on the roads. Living was not, so to speak, centralized as it is now, but decentralized; it was intensely regional and local, with the village as the circle, the home as the center of the circle, and the city far out on the periphery.

So, too, in the early years of the century, motion pictures still led a crude and almost furtive existence as nickelodeons operating in ill-smelling, uncomfortable store buildings in down-at-heel neighborhoods of cities; automobiles were the luxury of the rich or the eccentric, and the wireless, out of which the radio was later to emerge, was in an experimental state. In the absence of these elements that later were to play with centrifugal force on the reading habit, men depended upon their own resources for amusement, and reading was one of the most popular forms of entertainment.

In 1905, therefore, the rural population, with leisure before them, and with few facilities for dissipating it, spent part of it reading books. What they read is told us by the Sears, Roebuck catalogue of that year.

The best-selling book in the world has always been the Bible. Church attendance may decline, preachers may thunder that the days of Sodom and Gomorrah are at hand, scientists may demolish Adam and Eve, and scholars prove that the Bible is no more the

product of divine inspiration than the cookbook, but Bibles continue to lead all other books in annual volume of sales. If this is true now, it was certainly true in 1905, and, as proof, we find the catalogue of that year listing seventy-five kinds of Bibles and ten books about the Bible.

Nearly every home had, in addition to smaller Bibles, one big family Bible that was at once the repository of family history and the central altar of the home. It often lay on the parlor table flanked by Longfellow's "Poems" and the mail-order catalogue.

Many must have read "Our \$12.00 Family Bible Only \$4.89," if not for its text then for the extracurricular course in the appendix. Here one found "10 multi-colored plates, 4 superb half-tone engravings in gold and color; Jewish Worship, Tabernacles and Vestments, Holy Apostles with descriptions, 8 pages of maps of the Holy Land, and 32 full page Doré engravings."

These were Protestant Bibles, but the religious needs of Roman Catholics were not neglected by the universal catalogue. Catholic Bibles were more expensive than those of the Protestants, working out on a poundage basis at about forty cents a pound as compared with ten to twenty cents charged the Dissenters. The Catholic Bibles omit the vital statistics that were standard equipment for the Protestant, and, of course, the temperance pledge, because the temperance

movement in this country has largely been Protestant.

The catalogue of 1905 lists a number of books about the Bible, but none of them reveals the teachings and discoveries of evolutionists, psychologists, anthropologists, or astrophysicists whose words might throw doubt upon the conception of God as the creator of the universe and the father of mankind.

American life is perhaps inexplicable if the evangelistic strain that runs through it is omitted from consideration; many of the catalogue's books and the attitudes they exemplify are likewise inexplicable save in terms of evangelism. The lengthened shadow of the great and the obscure evangelists lingers upon the land; the orgiastic religionism of the Western and Southern pioneers is still practised in many parts of the country; everywhere it lies below the surface of the souls of the people capable of being evoked and brought to the top, in times of national stress, by the sonorous voices of eloquent preachers, whether lay, gospel, or political. This accounts in part for the sudden and sometimes cataclysmic changes of the national mood; from mild sunshine in morning to howling tornado by night. It throws some light upon the reason why Americans—as contradistinguished from Europeans—are more easily moved by moral outrage inflicted upon helpless nations or minorities than they are by their coldly

Are You at Ease Among Strangers?

People of culture and good breeding can be recognized at once. They are calm, well poised, at ease. They have dignity and self-assurance. Why? Because they are fortified with the knowledge of what to do, what to say and how to act on every occasion.

But there are other persons who are never at ease before people. They are awkward, self-conscious, fearful all the time that they will do something that is not right. These people are afraid to accept invitations because they don't know what to wear. They are afraid to go to receptions, balls, informal gatherings, because they do not know how to act. They have a haunting fear of making social blunders. They don't know how to acknowledge formal invitations, they do not know the social customs that every man and woman should know.

With the aid of "Etiquette" you need never be at a loss to know what to do on all occasions. This book will give you the key to what is proper to do, to write, to wear, to say. 384 pages. Cloth. Size, 5½x7½ inches. Shipping weight, 1 pound.

3V3500—ETIQUETTE—
An Encyclopedia of Good
Manners and Social
Usage..... 89c



"The pathetic fallacy that men could grow rich and cultured by reading this or that book . . ."
(From the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue for 1905.)

*The Saturday Review presents a condensation of a chapter from "The Good Old Days," by David L. Cohn to be published in March by Simon & Schuster. This is a chronicle of American social history as reflected in the Sears, Roebuck catalogues.

logical national interests. Woe unto that foreign power which seeks to interpret the trend of American international policy without taking deeply into consideration the strain of evangelism that surges in the blood of millions of Americans.

The catalogue is conscious of the bleak boredom that affected youngsters after they had attended church in the morning, eaten a heavy meal at noon, and then had nothing to anticipate for the remainder of the day except more Bible reading. It does not offer them for release what was then called a "French novel" or other earthly diversion, but a book whose purpose it frankly says is "to furnish entertainment and instruction for the young people during the long Sabbath afternoons." This sugar-coated morsel—almost profane reading—was "From Eden to Calvary, or, Through the Bible in a Year," by Grandpa Reuben Prescott.

After church services, adults, who wanted to sharpen their vision of the delights of heaven that they would someday encounter, peered through chinks in the pearly gates opened for them by the Right Reverend Samuel Fallows, D.D., in "The Home Beyond, or, View of Heaven," or dipped into a book written by D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, which contained "several hundred interesting stories about his wonderful works in Europe and America." Such volumes as these were, however, mere spiritual hors d'oeuvres to the genuinely devout. When they wanted something substantial upon which to feed their hungry, heaven-yearning souls, they bought forty pounds of Matthew Henry's "Works" (for \$7.75), because "Bible students appreciate the unfading freshness, the spiritual force, the quaint humor, and the evangelical richness of Matthew Henry's Exposition of the Old and New Testaments."

The catalogue's books—those that it included and those that it omitted—thus accurately reflected the religious mind of rural America in 1905.

Then, as now, the "best" novel was likely to be the last novel off the press. Consequently, we find the "best fiction of the day at prices that have no competition. The list given below does not pretend to be a complete record of all the new fiction published, but includes only the more popular and best selling books of the last six months."

"Beverly of Grustark," by George Barr McCutcheon; "Call of the Wild," by Jack London; "The Clansman," by Thomas Dixon; "God's Good Man," by Marie Corelli; "Lady Rose's Daughter," by Mrs. Humphrey Ward; "The Prodigal Son," by Hall Caine; "Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm," by Kate

D. Wiggins; "Sir Mortimer," by Mary Johnson; "The Virginian," by Owen Wister.

Augusta J. Evans was a novelist whose popularity remained undiminished for fifty years. The catalogue does not exaggerate when it says of her: "The author's genius and fascinating style are as fresh today in her later books as they were in her earlier, which after thirty-six years of constant use still hold their popularity."

Sir Walter Scott continued to hold, in 1905, the place that he had held for more than half a century in the esteem of American readers. His popularity flowed not only from the fact that he was an expert storyteller, but also because his novels were regarded as being "pure, wholesome, and inspiring," and the author himself one who led a life of noble rectitude. The touchstone, in fact, to popular success in literature over large stretches of America was not the content of a writer's books but the content of his life. If the author drank alcohol in any form, smoked opium, beat his wife, or lived outside the holy bonds of wedlock, then, although he may have been a Shakespeare, a Balzac, and a Dostoevsky rolled into one, he and his works were beyond the pale of respectable readers.

At the turn of the century, James Lane Allen's "Summer in Arcady" (first published in 1896) was immensely popular and was recommended in current editorials for reading by young girls. It attracted a great deal of attention and was considered daring, but daring in a wholesome manner, and well may it have been, for it was an excellent and detailed description of how to arouse a man and keep him happy though unsatisfied. Men are regarded as savage and dangerous creatures who must be outwitted and beaten at their own game by young



James Lane Allen. His "Summer in Arcady" was recommended reading for young girls.

girls, who, if triumphant, would then lead them captive to the altar. This is a point of view, of course, that still survives in much of the magazine fiction of our time: the seducing male turned into the adoring husband by a good woman, with detailed descriptions of trials and titillations en route from porch swing to church altar.

The novels of this period—again like much present-day magazine fiction—while containing an ironclad moral, were lush with sensuality and descriptions of what might not be done. As long as the writer prefixed a warm passage with a warning that this is what the young girl should avoid, she could indulge up to the very point where her virginity was in jeopardy and must then retreat.

The battle of conflicting points of view about chastity and marriage and sexual relations is nowhere reflected directly in the 1905 catalogue's book section. It offered its readers "the works of standard authors" such as Shakespeare, Oliver Optic, Hugo, Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Washington Irving, and Henty. The disturbing and doubtless immoral Thomas Hardy is absent, along with the wicked English boys of the days of "The Yellow Book," the infamous Russians, the decadent French, and the vicious Viennese and Germans.

Although Mark Twain had been practising the art of letters for many years before 1905, and had achieved fame both at home and abroad as a humorist, he was not represented among the humorists of the catalogue. The only reference to him is in a volume called "Hot Stuff," "A Collection of Witty Writings by Mark Twain, Eli Perkins, Josh Billings, Bill Nye, Alexander Sweet, Bret Harte, De Witt Talmage, and nearly fifty others. Humor, wit, pathos, satire and ridicule, repartee, bulls and blunders, clerical wit and humor, lawyer's wit and humor, anecdotes of great men, puns and conundrums, etc."

The catalogue honors another humorist, however, by the inclusion in its pages of Bill Nye's "Remarks"—"the author's greatest and best book." It then adds a devastatingly anticlimactic sentence of appraisal: "It is one that will live for weeks after other books have passed away."

In 1905, judging from the popular literature and social conventions of the times, one might have come to the conclusion that the rapid growth of the population proceeded not from the unholy contact of vile bodies, but out of pure parthenogenesis. American censorship and American prudery made the circulation and reading of any book difficult for the masses unless it was "wholesome," and the attitude of the country toward realistic

literature was still that of Tennyson in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After":

Authors—atheist, essayist, novelist,
realist, rhymester, play your part,
Paint the mortal shame of nature
with the living hues of Art.
Rip your brothers' vices open, strip
your own foul passions bare;
Down with Reticence, down with
Reverence—forward—naked—let
them stare.
Feed the budding rose of boyhood
with the drainage of your sewer;
Send the drain into the fountain,
lest the stream should issue pure.
Set the maiden fancies wallowing in
troughs of Zolaism,—
Forward, forward, ay and back-
ward, downward too into the
abysm.

But there was a large group of books—many of them are listed in the catalogue—about sex and its manifestations which escaped the ban because they purported to be "scientific" and at the same time dealt with the question in a "pure" manner. These books, dragging in God, the Bible, and purity, are obviously the reverse of scientific. They were written and bought primarily for their appeal to the puritan mind as pornography. Pornography indeed of a particularly scabrous kind and dirtier than the writing of jokes on lavatory walls; sootier than the laughter of yokels at a burlesque show; filthier than the talk of boys in a livery stable, because throughout these volumes the voice is allegedly the voice of God.

A significant incident of this period is the visit of Maxim Gorky to the United States in 1906. He and Madame Gorky were given a warm welcome on arrival and the great Russian writer was soon to be the guest of honor at a dinner to be attended by Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and other famous figures in the American world of literature and politics. But hardly had the Russian couple settled down in their rooms in the Hotel Belleclaire in New York before they were ejected because "the revolutionist was unable to satisfy the proprietor that the mother of Gorky's two children, who is still in Russia, had been divorced and that his present companion is his legal wife."

The Gorkys, it seems, were a menace to the sanctity of the American home, and were hounded from hotel to hotel and forced to deposit their luggage for safekeeping in the unopinionated luggage room of the Grand Central Terminal. Finally, the couple found asylum in the home of a friend on Staten Island. The dinner to Gorky was canceled and Mark Twain gave the following statement to the newspapers:

"Gorky came to this country to lend the influence of his great name—and
(Continued on page 17)

The Forces that Wrecked the Peace

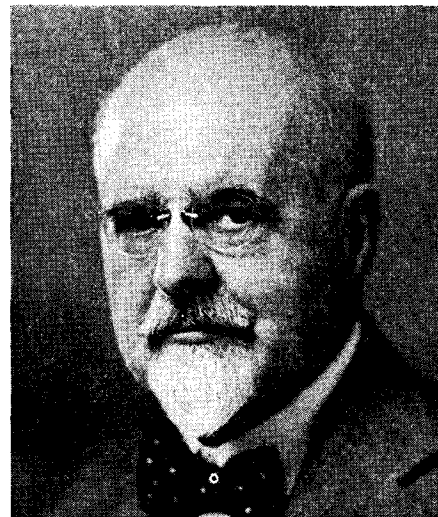
THE STORM BREAKS. A Panorama of Europe and the Forces That Have Wrecked Its Peace. By Frederick T. Birchall. New York: The Viking Press. 1940. 366 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JAMES FREDERICK GREEN

FREDERICK T. BIRCHALL needs no introduction to readers of *The New York Times*. After twenty-seven years with the *Times*, including six as Managing Editor, Mr. Birchall took charge of its European service in 1932. For the next seven years he acted as roving correspondent throughout Europe, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1934. Keen, alert, and wiry as a fox terrier, he managed to turn up for most of the exciting events of this exciting period. His articles, like those of Walter Duranty, were (and are, for Mr. Birchall is now in Canada) conspicuous in *The New York Times* for their personal and subjective style, easily identifiable even if not signed. Mr. Birchall, in fact, achieved such a remarkable success as foreign correspondent because he broke most of the formal rules taught in our schools of journalism.

"The Storm Breaks" is distinguished by the same accurate reporting, vivid description, and personal sentiment that marked Mr. Birchall's daily articles. Perhaps the best example of these qualities, including Mr. Birchall's mildly Anglophile attitude, may be found in the chapter called "Two Sovereigns," describing the funeral of King George V and the abdication of King Edward VIII. He manages to contrast the two personalities, to reflect the popular emotions in each instance, and to interpret accurately the place of the monarchy in British life. For some reason, Mr. Birchall omits entirely the coronation of King George VI, upon which in May, 1937 he lavished his most colorful sentences. There are many scenes that stand out in the reader's memory: the opening of the Disarmament Conference in 1932, Clara Zeitkin's address before the Reichstag, the first Nazi congress at Nuremberg, the suppression of the Vienna Socialists in 1934 and murder of Dollfuss in 1936, and the Munich conference. These are Birchall at his best.

Mr. Birchall's gift for description proves, however, to be something of a weakness, for it leaves little room for analysis. His book resembles a newsreel, offering many separate pictures of men and events rather than a connected narrative. While Germany remains the central point of discussion, it is treated episodically and not comprehensively. The weaknesses of



Wide World

Frederick T. Birchall

British policy are suggested but never thoroughly investigated. France and Italy figure only occasionally in Mr. Birchall's reminiscences; the Soviet Union almost never. The Spanish civil war is scarcely mentioned in a period dominated by its diplomatic and military developments. While enjoying the many brilliant portraits of human beings—individual and in the mass—and the graceful style, one is disappointed that Mr. Birchall fails consistently to scrape the surface of events and to relate and interpret his observations. As the subtitle suggests, this is a panorama but not a guide-book.

James Frederick Green is on the staff of the Foreign Policy Association. He is the author of various reports on recent European trends.

Ashes of Prophecy

EUROPE TO LET. By Storm Jameson. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1940. 282 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

MISS JAMESON subtitles her novel "The Memoirs of an Obscure Man" and suggests that the narrative is being told by a common man of earthy stock who has somehow become a writer. We had better begin by disregarding this. The idea of sifting the muddle of war and hatred through a simple, questioning mind is in all probability a good one, but that is not the idea of this book. From the first, the fiction of "I am a peasant; my bones ache in a north wind—" is whisked out of sight by the quality of the mind we see in operation. It is subtle, sophisticated, keenly sensitive to the shifting of forces super- and subterranean, and in the