

Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense

OSCAR WILDE AND THE YELLOW NINETIES. By Frances Winwar. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1940. 381 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ERNEST BOYD

WITH this, the fourth volume of her tetralogy dealing with the esthetic movements of the nineteenth century in England, Miss Winwar has brilliantly concluded an interesting and ambitious task. "Farewell the Banner" started the series with Coleridge and Wordsworth, "The Romantic Rebels" gave us Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and "Poor Splendid Wings" succeeded in arousing popular interest in the Rossettis and their circle. The field is obviously one which has often been explored before, but Miss Winwar has the original talent to make her subjects her own and, for that reason, she can take so hackneyed a theme as the eighteen-nineties, so over-written a personality as Oscar Wilde, and produce a book which is a scholarly portrait of an era and an intensely dramatic narrative.

Books about Wilde, with the possible exception of Frank Harris's excellent biography, have a tendency to get lost in a maze of arguments pro and con his friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas and of sophistries concerning the actual nature of his homosexuality. Studies of the literature of the period are inevitably far-fetched attempts to pump up interest in a group of fairly negligible writers who left no mark comparable to that of such of their contemporaries as remained outside the "movement," Bernard Shaw, Henry James, and George Moore, for example. Miss Winwar avoids both of these pitfalls, thereby ensuring, I think, the solid values of her book. The leading figures of the time are treated with critical detachment and at no great length. Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Symons emerge as the vague phantoms they were compared with the flaming personality of Wilde. In this troubled twentieth century it is difficult to understand why women, alcohol, drugs, and Catholicism were their only recourse against a not too cruel world.

Miss Winwar wastes little sympathy on them, for her attention is concentrated on the fascinating career of the doomed figure who bestrode that narrow London world like a colossus. What Frank Harris was the first, I believe, to adumbrate, she expounds illuminatingly: Wilde's school and college days in Ireland and his singular

parents, Sir William and Lady Wilde, he, the ugly, hard-drinking Lothario and brilliant surgeon, who founded the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital in Dublin, and she, the niece of the Irish Gothic romancer, Charles Matthew, and the "rebel" poetess, famed in Nationalist circles as "Speranza." Then there were Tyrrell and Mahaffy at Trinity College, where Wilde was always the successful rival of his nemesis, Sir Edward Carson. Characteris-



Painting by Toulouse-Lautrec
"Oscar Wilde's paganism was . . . a profound instinct."

tically, Mahaffy was revolted when his favorite pupil confessed leanings toward Catholicism acquired in the precious atmosphere of Oxford. "Come with me to Greece," he wrote to Wilde, "I am going to make an honest pagan out of you."

It is the author's contention that Mahaffy, Tyrrell, Walter Pater, and other mentors of his impressionable youth builded better—or worse!—than they knew. Wilde's paganism was more than the esthetic pose with which he began his career. It was a profound instinct at the very core of his being and he gradually outdistanced his masters. They could read Plato, as Jowett could translate the "Dialogues," without bowdlerization, but Wilde understood the love of Socrates for Charmides like "an honest pagan," not like a college don. When Lionel Johnson introduced Lord Alfred Douglas to Wilde, destiny began to shape his end. More clearly and more dramatically than any other biographer of Wilde, Miss Winwar conveys the true nature of this encounter. She shows how he had

fallen in love with his wife and how the ardent lover soon became an indifferent husband, but an affectionate father. But now Wilde was in love as he had never been before and would never be again.

The brief story of Wilde's courtship and marriage would have been a commonplace, but for the fact that Wilde's dormant love was aroused by a boy. Furthermore, he was quite honestly convinced, as most modern psychologists are, that homosexuality is not a crime. Unfortunately for him, if not a vice, it was a crime under English law, and he had to pay the penalty for committing what was legally a crime. Miss Winwar very skillfully builds up and analyzes the situation thus created.

The various disreputable characters who were rounded up as witnesses at the Wilde trials were not to be confounded with a person who stood in the special relationship of Lord Alfred Douglas. To him Wilde was devoted body and soul, his companionship was essential to his intellectual development. In fact, all his most distinguished work was written while this intimacy was at its height. Had Wilde been heterosexual, he could have divorced and remarried. As it was, he was caught by that "love that dare not speak its name," and while the object of his affections got off scot free, he was condemned for his sordid adventures with male prostitutes.

Miss Winwar is to be congratulated on the frankness and delicacy with which she treats this great tragedy of the Yellow Nineties. The thrice-told tale of the three trials comes to life again, the loyalty of friends, and the hopelessness of trying to oppose the British public in one of those fits of moral indignation at which even Macaulay jibed. Oscar Wilde in all his strength and weakness is here, with all his charm, his wit, his insolence, with only the more fortunate Whistler as his peer.

The melancholy period after his release, his feeble and ineffectual efforts to come back, his ignominious and degraded end are movingly and strikingly described. We are spared all the usual controversies as to the financial relations between Wilde and Douglas. Miss Winwar is admirably detached in weighing these two clashing personalities, who could not be parted save by death. Many of her pages recapture something of the exotic style of the period and enhance the value of her invaluable book.

Ernest Boyd is a journalist and literary critic. He is the author of "Appreciations and Depreciations" and "Studies in Ten Literatures."

Dilettante Bachelor in a Spanish Town

THE SPANISH ADVENTURES OF WASHINGTON IRVING. By Claude G. Bowers. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1940. 306 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT E. SPILLER

THERE are many good reasons for writing a book, but the best is probably the unreasoning desire to write that particular one. Mr. Bowers, the Ambassador to Spain from 1933 to 1939, fell under the spell of his predecessor, Envoy-Extraordinary Washington Irving, when, soon after his arrival, he attended a three-day fiesta in Granada in honor of the author of "The Alhambra" and other more serious works. Mr. Bowers, the historian, was officially on a holiday from his researches, but the temptation was too great. For his own amusement he followed Irving about, identified the places where he had lived, talked with descendants of people who had known him, read his journals and reread the history of Spain. For several years he lived, as only an historian can, in the past and the present simultaneously. Irving's Spain and his own unfolded for him together, even to the beautiful Leocadia Zamora, forgotten but for her portrait in a charming old Spanish house. The contrast was dramatic and distressing. Mr. Bowers could not help it; the book wrote itself.

There was really no justification for another book on Irving in Spain after Stanley Williams's definitive and penetrating biography, nor was there reason for another book on the Spain of the 1820's and 40's, but there is always excuse for a good fireside gossip on any colorful topic. Step by step this story unfolds as the dilettante bachelor and litterateur of 1826 makes his way through the volatile society of Madrid and the provinces. Little known characters like the antiquarian and bibliophile Obadiah Rich and the Russian Prince Dmitri Dolgourki who was Irving's companion at the Alhambra, emerge from obscurity. Unbelievably beautiful Spanish women and their vivacious American, English, and French sisters pass in review before the discrete but discerning eye of the professional bachelor. The epoch comes to a close when the Neopolitan Princess, Maria Christina, arrives to become Queen; and the American Envoy returns to his home on the Hudson, but not before we have lived over again, more intimately perhaps than in any printed pages other than his own, the romantic interlude of the Alhambra with the faithful Dolores for attendant and Mateo for guide.

When Irving returned in 1842, a royal drama was being enacted with the child-Queen Isabella II in the stellar rôle and the returned exile, Maria Christina, as the chief plotter. The second half of the book lacks some of the charm of the first, for Irving was older, but the events are more colorful and dramatic. They give the story a natural suspense and unity centering upon the plots and plans for the marriage of the Queen while governments rise and fall.

Through it all the American, still



Harris & Ewing

"Mr. Bowers could not help it; the book wrote itself."

an amused and romantic bachelor, retains his detachment. The mere narration of events as Irving saw them gives a better understanding of his sentimentalism than could any critical comment. He seems very old-fashioned, almost quaint. In these days, such continuous tasting of life without taking deep draughts is well-nigh impossible. Our tempo is faster, our feelings more disordered and acute. But in recreating his predecessor, Mr. Bowers has recaptured the flavor of the past and restored a Spain that has gone. He draws no moral; he merely tells his tale.

"X" Equals N. H.

The mysterious book announced several weeks ago simply as "X" by G. P. Putnam's Sons, is now revealed as "Failure of a Mission" by Sir Nevile Henderson, British Ambassador to Berlin from 1937 to 1939. It will be published in the middle of April.

The Trouser-less Philosophy of Mr. M.

THE WANDERING YEARS. By Weston Martyr. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1940. 275 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HASSOLDT DAVIS

IT is because of Mr. Martyr's abhorrence of the rut that his autobiography is continually surprising, not merely in incident, of which there is sufficient for several lifetimes, but in unstereotyped reflection. "At about this time," he writes in the midst of a conventional chapter, "I gave up wearing trousers," and proceeds to make a philosophical point of the matter. He wanders in print as he did in person, but he wanders excitingly, from reflection to physical adventure and back again.

As a boy apprentice aboard sailing ships he learned nothing more of the world than that it consisted largely of quays with cranes on them, and as a gold miner in South Africa, working a mile underground, he learned even less. China gave him his rarest adventures in the company of Sam Payne who taught him the tricks of seal and trochus poaching, rum-running, and white slavery. Occasionally they did well; more often they lived on fish and coconuts. As a commercial pirate in Japan, Mr. Martyr prospered at once by such deals as the sale of twenty thousand tons of dud coal to Siam, but he slaved at his piracy, and it was only the outbreak of the World War in 1914 that saved his health and sanity.

He came actually to life, he writes, on Vimy Ridge, when for the first time he recognized fear and learned to cope with it. His "encysted" mind emerged to weigh the costs of war, but it was re-encysted for several years subsequently, and indeed came close to mania when faced with a peaceful world and the need for a livelihood. The gradual reconstruction of the man makes a vivid piece of self-analysis. He became a yachtsman and writer, and now in his fifty-third year is about to give up his calm country living for service in the war.

Weston Martyr writes with a seeming ingenuousness that conceals the wisdom of his book. All he has learned is included here, and his learning is wide. If you would know how to eat dynamite, or prove the superiority of mules to horses, or outwit your wily fellow, the instruction is here, but oddly enough you can learn as well how one man may mate pride to humility and love a life which his mind detests. "Pah!" he cries. "I spit in my face!" It is a sight to read about.