

# American Prophet

*AMERICAN GIANT: Walt Whitman and His Times. By Frances Winwar. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1941. 341 pp. \$3.50.*

Reviewed by CLIFTON JOSEPH FURNESS

"I GREET you at the beginning of a great career," said Emerson to Walt Whitman. These fateful words might herald Frances Winwar's evocation of the spirit of Walt Whitman, "American Giant." It stands first on the "must" list of this year's historical reading. Though not so much a biography as a pageant of America seen through the eyes of Whitman, and Winwar, it is indispensable to the Whitman library. She conjures up the past magically. Compared with this, her previous books are shoddy, with the possible exception of "Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties." Unlike most prize-winners and successful formula-writers, she knows how to grow. The author soars no middle flight, her wings have been scorched by the sun, yet she comes safely home.

In its drive, Miss Winwar's work, though lacking in intellectual integrity, is akin to genius. The light of her fidelity to the inner spirit shines through in spite of frequent palpable errors. Her spontaneity counterbalances her inadequate research. Here is the truth of the imagination, not literal truth. She is romantically inaccurate, for instance, in ascribing Whitman's illness to "the poisoned cut in his hand got while helping the surgeon to amputate a gangrened limb." As a matter of fact, the cut that caused infection, leading finally to paralysis, was received from a less picturesque source. Mrs. W. D. O'Connor, who helped Whitman with his work in the hospitals, tells the true story in an unpublished manuscript: "The beginning of his illness: he was with the soldiers at Washington, and while cutting a can open he cut an artery, and he continued to visit the soldiers in that ward, where there was a great deal of gangrene and the wound became poisoned, and the doctor advised him to keep away from that ward till he recovered." Yet intuitively Miss Winwar hit on the truth, for in essence he sacrificed his health for the soldiers, even though his fatal injury came not from a surgeon's knife, but from a prosaic can-opener!

The vitality of her imagination, fired by indefatigable emotion, spurs her to utterances of an inspired seer. Like Joan of Arc she seems to hear voices—angelic, rather than daemonic—that lead her to believe only the best in everybody, including Walt



Frances Winwar

Whitman. And who is to say that believing in basic virtues is false idealism? It is refreshing in these days of blasé muckraking to find in our reading some note of faith in humanity. Here is a striking example. To lift Whitman above the imputations of John Addington Symonds, Miss Winwar invents a pretty story of one brief incandescent romance with a woman in New Orleans. Her naive assumption that Whitman's tintype photograph of a young woman was taken in New Orleans in 1848 is easily disproved. Yet the fundamental impression of Whitman's character created by Miss Winwar's fantasy is sane and true—that Whitman was a pretty good sort, not merely a *gourmet* in sexuality, but that most of his love experience was in the true sense platonic.

After all, what do technical errors matter in a book meant not for scholars, but for the lay reader, the "divine average" American, whom Whitman, like Lincoln and Barnum, tried to serve? Miss Winwar has succeeded in her effort to "shave the whiskers off of the 'Good Gray Poet'," revealing the human, all too human, features that have been long buried under pious herbage.

Inevitably, along with all its allurements, "American Giant" possesses largely the defects of its outstanding quality of humanness. It sacrifices accuracy for story interest, as in the purposeful distortion of the New Orleans episode. We must agree with Harrison S. Morris, a friend of Whitman who really understood him through personal contact: "This is no time to publish a book on Walt unless you fill it with glances behind your hand at his alleged ladies, and even other sexualities." Miss Winwar's *Whitman* is a novelist's treatment of Walt with all the drama possible.

# Henry W. Nevinson

By R. Ellis Roberts

HENRY WOOD NEVINSON, who died in England just before his eighty-fifth birthday, was one of the great journalists of our day. He was poet, short-story writer, essayist, reformer, enthusiast. One compares him to such men as his slightly younger contemporary Robert Cunningham Grahame, or, in this country, to that gallant advocate of reason, poetry, and the good life, Charles Erskine Scott Wood. Most people knew best Nevinson's work as a correspondent. He saw war and revolution in Greece, Russia, Africa, Europe. He wrote, too, of old wars and old revolutions, ever faithful to his conviction that at long last truth and the better cause would triumph.

A tall, strikingly handsome man, Nevinson was one of the most popular men in London. Popular especially with his colleagues. In between wars he was literary editor and contributor to more than one London paper; his best years at this were with the *Daily Chronicle* and *The Nation*, and such men as John Masefield, H. M. Tomlinson, and E. C. Bentley owed much to his encouragement.

Whenever there was injustice, you would find Nevinson fighting it—helping E. D. Morel in the Congo, helping nationalists in India, helping revolutionists in Russia.

Unfortunately his great variety of activities obscured his position as an artist. In a book, "Between the Acts," published nearly forty years ago he wrote some of the best stories of our time. One "A Don's Day," deserves a place in any anthology of writing about Oxford. Another book, "Essays in Freedom," contains some of the noblest political writing of our day. The book which will certainly secure him a niche in any history of post-Victorian literature is his long—perhaps overlong—autobiography "Changes and Chances." It is an invaluable portrait of a man, a picture of a time, and a reflection of one of the most dynamic, if not the most pretentious, reform movements of his day—the movement roughly called Christian Socialist. Nevinson was himself a nostalgic agnostic; and he retained the greatest admiration and affection for men like Charles Gore and Henry Scott Holland. His very presence at a gathering was an inspiration to younger and idler men; he was always generous in his praise of others, and could advertise his friends with a pertinacity and skill which some of them wished he would devote to himself.

# The Western Plains

*THE SHORT GRASS COUNTRY.* By Stanley Vestal. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1941. 304 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

STANLEY VESTAL, of the University of Oklahoma, has written several books, good books, about the West, and this book about the short grass country is a fine job. The thing that the American people do not understand about their country is that just west of the Mississippi River the land slopes up from an altitude of five hundred feet to an altitude of five thousand feet before it reaches the Rocky Mountains.

"The short grass country" is the land found at an altitude from two thousand to five thousand feet in Northwestern Texas, Western Oklahoma, Western Kansas, Eastern Colorado, and Northern New Mexico. The short grass is known out there as buffalo grass. It occasionally is found in altitudes as low as a thousand feet, in buffalo wallows. In the last three decades of the old century, these buffalo wallows containing short, highly nutritious grass, were found even in the bluestem pastures of the prairies. But now the short grass grows naturally only in the higher altitudes. It is a grass on which cattle may graze all winter if the temperature does not drive them indoors. It is a highly nutritious grass. It is grown in a sandy soil.

There again, where the sandy soil of the high plains meets the rich alluvial loam of the prairies is a distinction between the different ends of half a dozen states. The high plains are sandy. The prairies are alluvial loam. Another difference is found in the rainfall of the prairies and of the plains. Take Kansas: The rainfall of Western Kansas, as the altitude passes two thousand feet, is from one-half to one-third less than it is in Eastern Kansas where the altitude runs from two thousand feet down to seven or eight hundred.

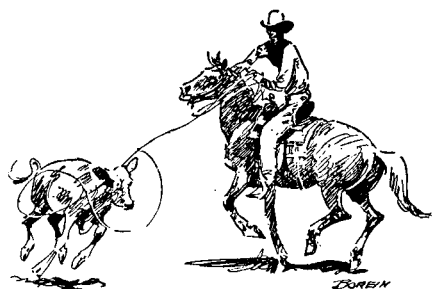
These differences in altitude, in soil, in rainfall, make two different kinds of states, two different kinds of communities in one commonwealth. In the high plains of the short grass country, the ordinary size of the farm ranges from two hundred to two thousand acres. In the lower altitudes, a farm in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas runs anywhere from eighty to two hundred acres. Rarely are farms much larger in the land of the heavy rainfall and the alluvial soil. There the barnyard stockman raises a few cattle, perhaps

has some dairy cattle, keeps pigs, chickens, turkeys, sheep and from half a dozen to fifty beef animals, probably Herefords. The farmer in the low countries lives on his farm. He raises corn, alfalfa, wheat, soybeans, a little flax sometimes, and a lot of sorghums. He stores his crops in bins and silos for the winter. He is still somewhat self-subsistent. He grows a little of what he eats.

But out further West on the great farms in the high plains, agriculture has become an industrial process. The discovery of wheat in the last decade of the nineteenth century transformed the short grass country into a one-crop country—wheat. There tractors plow the ground in the late summer for the sowing in early autumn, and the wheat crop lies there untouched until late May or June or early July, depending on whether the harvest is in Texas or Western Dakota. Then along comes the combine and cuts the whole crop and thrashes it in one operation. That kind of farming is nothing like the farming of the eastern ends of these Missouri Valley states. The farming of the short grass country produces another kind of farmer from the prairie farms. Often the western farmer does not live on his farm. Often he lives in the county seat village. Quite as often he may live in one of the larger towns in the eastern part of the state. If the short grass farmer does not grow wheat he runs cattle on his short grass pastures. It takes three acres to pasture a steer in Eastern Kansas, for instance, and ten or fifteen acres to pasture the same steer in Western Kansas.

All this and more is set down in Stanley Vestal's "Short Grass Country." He has told a story that every American should read if he wants to understand his country. The influence of climate upon man is seen nowhere in the United States so brightly illumined as it is in these states just east of the Rocky Mountains, where two kinds of civilization have been produced by differences in altitude which, in turn, have given us two kinds of soil, two degrees of rainfall, two kinds of towns, and, in a measure, two different kinds of people.

This book should be a "must" book for every class in American civilization in every college in the U. S.



# Newport Saga

*GOOD OLD SUMMER DAYS.* By Richmond Barrett. New York: Appleton-Century Co. 1941. 338 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FAIRFAX DOWNEY

NEWPORT, Narragansett Pier, Saratoga, Long Branch, and Bar Harbor are here chronicled. With Newport, Mr. Barrett really goes to town, if so inelegant an expression may be permitted in connection with that haunt of the élite. He knew it when. He was born and raised there and there he still dwells. In spite of or because of that, he writes about it with a nice balance. To him it is neither to be pitied nor scorned nor worshipped. He does his full duty by Newport as a social historian, neglecting neither the glamour nor the "dirt." His anecdotes are interesting, his character sketches deft.

The Newport saga sparkles with such good stories as that of the most devastating snub (it was to a divorcée) ever administered at the Casino; the revelries of the early tennis champions whose elbow trouble (acquired while hoisting 'em at the bar) interfered with their playing; the antics of Ward McAllister and Harry Lehr; the fate of Mrs. Goelet's gowns (they fell to a theatrical costumer and still see service on the boards). The epilogue is more than a touch grim. Not a few of the leaders of Society, after a succession of Newport seasons, became stone-deaf or died insane, which supports the suspicion of the hoi polloi that social eminence isn't worth the effort.

Narragansett Pier is scanted. Newporters didn't think much of it except as a playground for Newport gentlemen on the loose. The account of Bar Harbor lacks color and liveliness. Long Branch seems only to have been briefly prominent as a summer White House of Presidents Grant and Garfield. White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, draws an intriguing reference: "It was a regular practice in certain communities to 'make up a purse' for some well-born but poor girl and to send her off thus fortified to seek a husband at the great marriage mart of the Old White."

While this reviewer prefers Hugh Bradley's book on Saratoga and the revivification of that resort in Edna Ferber's latest novel, Mr. Barrett does not a little to supplement them with such neat allusions as that to the furniture of the renowned old hotels—"big connubial double beds . . . suggesting ancestral wedding nights."

Photographs and prints, while too few, are an addition.