

The March of Quotations

THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS. With an Introduction by Carl Van Doren. New York: Oxford University Press. 1941. 879 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

A MORE delicious case of English insularity (and I say it as one who greatly honors the English for many things) has seldom come to the attention of this reviewer than is "The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations." The idea of American literature to be derived from it is so very startling, that I wonder how Carl Van Doren, the elected introducer, managed to hold his tongue. O God, O Montreal, such beauties there are! Let us see, let us see!

First are plucked these posies: three lines from a sonnet by T. B. Aldrich; the title "What Price Glory?" from Maxwell Anderson; "America! America! God shed his grace on thee," by Katherine Lee Bates; "All Quiet Along the Potomac," by Ethel Lynn Beers; "Come on and hear Alexander's Ragtime Band," by Irving Berlin; the end of "Thanatopsis" by Bryant; Gelett Burgess's "Purple Cow," and so on and so on. They've got two names for Bret Harte (a mammoth discovery) and a half page for T. S. Eliot because they think he's English. They do not fail to include the great sayings of Henry Ford and Texas Guinan, and they give Edna St. Vincent Millay one line, which, in glorious juxtaposition, stands thus:

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY
1892—

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.

The Harp-Weaver, pt. IV, sonnet xxii.

MRS. EMILY MILLER
1833-1913

I love to hear the story
Which angel voices tell.

The Little Corporal. I love to Hear

They never heard of William Vaughn Moody, but they quote one verse from the "Unmanifest Destiny" of Richard Hovey, while omitting his far more popular and well-known (since you're getting down to household words) "It's always fair weather, when good fellows get together!" They think Don Marquis (God rest him!) is still alive, and that the late Du Bose Heyward (also listed as living), whose "Porgy" merely would have yielded them several quotations, invented the phrase "Roll dem bones." Emily Dickinson has three quotes, William Jennings

Bryan has two, Cabell has three; Longfellow actually has three pages, while Whitman has a page and a half and Oliver Wendell Holmes about a page. A famous American writer is Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr with those deathless lines:

*O true brave heart! God bless thee,
whereso e'er
In God's great universe thou art
to-day!*

Clement C. Moore, Stoddard King, Joyce Kilmer only for "Trees," Anita Loos for the title, "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"; (James Joyce has the title of one of his books listed too!) James Ryder Randall and Robert Cameron Rogers; the Roosevelts of the Strenuous Life and the New Deal; William Penn and John J. Pershing ("Lafayette—!"); Wash Irving and Henry James (British);

Andrew Johnson and (Thank God!) Patrick Henry and Dan'l Webster; Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman and Sam Walter Foss; Herbert Hoover ("a noble experiment") and Joe Chandler Harris; Ben Franklin and a page for James Russell Lowell.

In the English corner? Bill Shakespeare, of course, gets a lot, half as much again as the Holy Bible and the Book of Common Prayer put together, sixty-four or so pages. Nobody can touch him. Alf Tennyson, runner-up among the poets (or prose-writers too, for that matter), is a very bad second with about fourteen pages, Milton third with about thirteen, Kipling fourth with eleven, Wordsworth (the old platitudinarian) fifth with ten. Our own Abraham Lincoln gets a little more than half a page, and our leading modern poets, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, and Elinor Wylie, have said nothing memorable at all. Try and find them! Even Gerald Stanley Lee is "in", with the great statement, "Business to-day consists of persuading crowds." On the same page is our Henry Lee with "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his fellow citizens." "Countrymen," which we learned at school, was wrong. But then old British Ben Jonson in this decorous vol. is called Benjamin Jonson—I think almost for the first time in English literature!

It's a gorgeous book! Now let's be fair.

When you go to the English index to look up a line or phrase that is as old as the hills and whose author you have completely forgotten, if you ever

knew, the chances are you can spot it without trouble—example: under Home, "Little Gray Home in the West"—like a flash you find out it was D. Eardley Wilmot *contemp.* (*orary* is the way you fill that out—not what you thought!) The pagination and indexing are perfect for quick attribution of the familiar line or verse to the right author. And incidentally, most of the sayings you thought proverbs were made up by Jonathan Swift (Irish)! I should say "The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations" would be a crackerjack book for those games of Quotations played at parties where people don't know any quotations. Even if the American

novel is represented by one sentence from Edith Wharton's "Xingu," aside from three short quotes from "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and the listing of James Fenimore Cooper's title "The Last of the Mohicans"; even if, for literacy, you have to repair to John Bartlett as revised by Christopher Morley and Louella D. Everett; there are a couple of things I have learned from the laborers in this golden treasury. One is that it was Cornelius Whurr who wrote the lines my father was always fond of quoting,

What lasting joys the man attend
Who has a polished female friend

(I have found that useful in life!) The other is a juxtaposition of Phoebe Cary to Harry Castling (a new-found male friend!) which makes

Nearer the great white throne,
Nearer the crystal sea.

end in

What-Ho! She bumps!
Let's all go down the Strand.

Meanwhile they can continue to give Chesterton more space than Chaucer, and take no notice of the fact that in these barbaric United States we ever wrote anything. There'll always be another England—so see if I care!

ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. Clement C. Moore: "A Visit from St. Nicholas."
2. Tennyson: "In Memoriam."
3. Shakespeare: "As You Like It."
4. Milton: "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity."
5. Thackeray: "The Mahogany Tree."
6. Charles Wesley: "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."
7. Robert Herrick: "Ceremonies for Christmas."
8. Ben Jonson: "A Hymn on the Nativity."

Sitwellian Variety

OPEN THE DOOR! By Osbert Sitwell. New York: Smith & Durrell. 1941. 299 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

OSBERT SITWELL possesses superbly three gifts invaluable to a writer of short stories—liveliness, style, and a sense of period. There are moments when, a little sated by too much “modern” fiction, I am inclined to think the last gift the most valuable. Novel after novel, tossed to us from Intelligentsia Point, contains men and women who live a strange, cerebral, cosmic, or ventral existence, and belong to no recognizable world of our experience. Mr. Sitwell produces in every one of these stories human beings we know, or whom our parents knew: here are people who, if they came to America, Father would have known how to talk to.

“Open the Door!” is a book of rich variety. Here are stories of Edwardian and Victorian England, of South Italy with cosmopolitan gentry of Italy and England, one bitter, brilliant study of three young women who were super-rich, stories of artists, near-artists, and critics, and some stories of to-day, of England at war, of France at despair. “Defeat,” a tale of a French officer after the surrender, is the best, most moving thing yet to be written

of the first, immediate sensations that overwhelm the vanquished—it has tenderness, depth, and an understanding veracity. Of the lighter stories “The Glow-Worm,” a mischievous caricature of the more rancid kind of columnists is very good fun, and “Cham-pagne for the Old Lady” has a pleasant, O Henry-ish twist to it. Occasionally Mr. Sitwell’s liveliness gets a little out of bounds. In one of the best of the stories of a vanished race, “Dead Heat,” a tale of two old royal ladies, German and Russian, in exile at Geneva, he tells us that the German used to stay in England “with a bearded bishop” who had a wife and “eleven moustached daughters.” Not all eleven with moustaches: not the strongest episcopal beard could so dominate a family.

While this book should be carefully avoided by all who detest wit, tolerance, and civilization, it will rejoice alike those who can still weep for mankind and those who can laugh. Some readers will turn most eagerly to the stories of to-day, others to those little glimpses—“True Lovers’ Knot” is one of the keenest—of “those halcyon days of waists and bustles and bonnets, of hansom-cabs and top-hats and frock-coats, when life was serene and unruffled except for the disturbances that you, as an individual, chose to make for your own diversion.”

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

THE POETS AND CHRISTMAS

Very few of the world’s poets have failed to find inspiration in the story of Christmas. The verses below are taken from eight famous poems. Allowing 12½ points for each author correctly named, a score of 50 is par, 62 is good, 75 or better is excellent. Answers are on page 14.

1. 'Twas the night before Christmas,
when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even
a mouse. . . .
2. The time draws near the birth of
Christ:
The moon is hid; the night is
still;
The Christmas bells from hill
to hill
Answer each other in the mist.
3. Heigh ho, sing heigh ho, unto the
greene holly,
Most friendship is feigning; most
Loving, meere folly:
Then heigh ho, the holly,
This Life is most jolly.
4. This is the month, and this the
happy morn
Wherein the Son of Heaven's Eter-
nal King,
Of wedded maid and virgin mother
born,
Our great redemption from above
did bring. . . .
5. Christmas is here;
Winds whistle shrill,
Icy and chill,
Little we care:
Little we fear
Weather without
Sheltered about
The mahogany tree.
6. Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled.”
7. Come, bring with a noise,
My merry, merry boys,
The Christmas log to the firing,
While my good dame, she
Bids ye all be free,
And drink to your heart's desiring.
8. I sing the birth was born tonight,
The author both of life and light;
The angels so did sound it.
And like the ravished shepherds
said,
Who saw the light, and were afraid,
Yet searched, and true they
found it.



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