

Warrior, Scholar, Patriot

OWEN GLENDOWER. By John Cowper Powys. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1941. (2 vols.) 938 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

OWEN GLENDOWER'S rebellion against Henry Bolingbroke, Henry IV of England, occupied roughly the years 1400 to 1410, and the fear of it and of the great Welshman was not sweated out of English bones until Glendower's death in 1416. It is a period full of color, and romance, and vileness, and chivalry, of strange learning and doodling superstitions; some of the men, Henry IV, his son, Harry Hotspur, and Glendower himself have been presented to us by Shakespeare, and there are Welsh records of Glendower and his court. In Mr. Powys's romance, interminably verbose, overaccentuated, pompously and vaguely mystagogic, and with its adolescent emphasis on sexual cruelty, the historical figures are stirred to life only occasionally. Owen Glendower, a warrior, a scholar, and a patriot is drawn now more than life-size, now removed from humanity, and now reduced to a crazy pattern of uncontrolled impulses.

In this last he resembles nearly all Mr. Powys's major characters—a little crazy, vastly unpleasant in their off moments, and with a most unanimous interest in the infliction or endurance of pain. Now pain, and even sexual cruelty, can be subjects in imaginative literature—from Aeschylus to William Faulkner imaginative artists have used them: but it is fatal, if the romancer wishes to avoid the repulsion of the normal reader, to present them not as things done or suffered, but as spectacles watched. There is a delectation in prying and whispering and analyzing in this novel which for me makes much of the book frankly disgusting.

Apart from Owen the book's hero is Rhisiart, half-Welsh, half-Norman, a young man just down from Oxford in 1400, a grave and grey-headed judge at its end in 1416: certainly, as he had to go through Mr. Powys's novel, this premature senility is not unnatural. Throughout his life in the book Rhisiart is unable to distinguish between love and cruelty; when he watches a vile lady, with opulent curves, scold obscenely at her helpless and rejected lover, Rhisiart hates her and yet something about her "made that hatred quiver and vibrate with a craving to hug her till she cried out under his grip."

This Alice is a lady whom Rhisiart really detests: what he feels to-



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ward those he likes I must leave the reader of the book to discover. Mr. Powys spares neither fancy nor paper in conveying the information.

Two of the more amiable and normal persons in the story are a mad

Franciscan who believes Richard II is still alive, and a Welsh Joan of Arc, Tegolin, whom Rhisiart and the Friar and, for a mad month or two Glendower himself are in love with: she marries Rhisiart and together they are captured by the English. In the many scenes of fighting, public or personal, Mr. Powys's gusto is a little less morbid: Mars is certainly less repulsive than Venus.

Mr. Powys derives—this book makes it quite clear—from the old school of horror story. Today if we are to have horror, it must be imaginative and spiritual as in Julian Green's work, or some books of Kafka's. Mr. Powys's bullies and bogies, brutes and maniacs, mouthy seers and boastful bards are but painted cardboard; and they move in a fifteenth century of the novelist's own invention. Mr. Powys takes no pains to make his period references accurate; I admit his right to use modern language—though one jibs a little when Rhisiart uses such expressions as "dangerously hypnotic" and "mass-obsession"—but his ignorance of the period, especially in matters of religion, is so great that the book loses all pretensions to being an historical novel, except in certain details of decoration.

Not Flashy But Democratic

ROYAL WILLIAM. By Doris Leslie. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1941. 397 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

TO build romance around the life and character of William IV is something of a feat. To do so affectionately and honestly, without serious distortion of the facts, without resort to the malice of satire, and without condescension, is a triumph. Creevey, Greville, and the rest of his scribbling contemporaries thought him a dull fellow, boorish, ignorant, stupid, probably crazy like his honored father. A good many later historians have echoed their verdict. But Mrs. Leslie disagrees, and to prove her point she creates a novel which is certainly not dull, and which makes William thoroughly interesting. She does not, of course, turn him into a Prince Charming. She does not attempt to contradict Creevey, Greville, and the others. She interprets their evidence to show that for all his uncouthness, he was a kind and generous man; that for all his seeming foolishness, he was more frequently right in his judgments and his prophecies than were his contemptuous critics. This sounds as if her book were a long defensive argument. It is not. She is too good a novelist for that. It is a straightforward

narrative, well-designed and well-executed, into which the serious defense has been invisibly woven.

William's life falls naturally into three divisions. First he was a sailor, enthusiastic but erratic. The Admiralty was doubtless wise in relieving him from active duty, though their coolness sorely tried his temper. It was he, however, and not the Admiralty that first recognized the genius of Nelson. The second period, to the joy of satirist and cartoonist, was devoted to the long *liaison* with Mrs. Jordan, the talented actress who bore him ten children. Here, and here only, does Mrs. Leslie let melodrama take a hand in her story. She suggests reasons for the break between them which are exciting theater but unconvincing history. And, finally, he was King, a naive and humdrum king, as compared with his flashy predecessor, but probably the only one of his family under whom the Reform Act of 1832 could have been passed. Mrs. Leslie is at her best in describing his conduct during that momentous year: his initial enthusiasm, his vacillation, his eventual large-minded acquiescence (against the insistent advice of wife and family). He was England's first democratic monarch, and, whatever his faults, he merits the kindness of Mrs. Leslie's considered homage.

The Vanishing American Playwright

ROBERT E. SHERWOOD

TODAY we American dramatists are in danger of becoming a vanishing race. We are not succeeding in reproducing our own kind. During the decade of the 1920s there was a great rush of playwriting talent into the American theatre. The leader of this, of course, was Eugene O'Neill.

Now the members of that enthusiastic generation are aging perceptibly. Speaking as one of this generation, I can say that our ranks are thinning—and so are our ideas. We desperately need reinforcement. But in the past ten years, the number of young playwrights coming forward has been pathetically small. The majority of those who have revealed any degree of talent in one or two plays have seemed to quit too rapidly. Too many of them have taken the road to Hollywood, and that road has proved a one-way street.

There are many explanations for this sad state of affairs. I have heard all of these explanations, and I beg to express the opinion that none of them is any good.

The chief of them is, of course, that the decline in play-writing has been due to economic causes. The theatre, it is said, is financially defunct.

Perhaps. But this consideration has not stopped the flood of the young, ambitious, and courageous people who have talent—or who hope they have talent—as actors, directors, scene designers. The heroism, the determination, of these young people of the theatre are wonderful to behold. They are undergoing indescribable hardship and frustration—and starvation as well—in their struggle for opportunity.

And the lack of opportunity is not due to lack of money in the theatre. It is entirely due to the fact that playwrights aren't writing enough acceptable plays.

Another explanation of this failure is that modern life furnishes inadequate inspiration for the playwright—who cannot say, as Sophocles said, "Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man." Or, as Shakespeare said, "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a God!"

Are these glowing tributes to humanity any less true—or justifiable—today than they were in Periclean Ath-

ens or Elizabethan England? Certainly Sophocles and Shakespeare could not be called optimists. But they were poets, and poets, however subject to melancholia, are eternally men of great faith.

What Sophocles and Shakespeare said—what all the great dramatists, tragic and comedic, have said—is that man is frail, man is vain, man is mortal—but that he is still capable of reaching, as did Prometheus, into the highest heaven and snatching the very fire from the hand of God.

THAT is what the theatre has been for, from its very beginning—to make credible the incredible, to awaken the king that dwells in every humble man, the hero in every coward. The Athenian dramatists first attempted and achieved this at a time when men trod warily in a tiny world which was completely surrounded and beset by the supernatural, the divine, the inexplicable. The sun had not then been measured and analyzed chemically. It was a god in a chariot. The wind that blew over Hymettus and the sea that beat against Sunium were dread beings. And yet, Athenian dramatists managed to assert for the first time on earth the dignity of man.

"We easily believe that which we wish," said Corneille.

The dramatist cannot be dismissed as merely a successful merchant of wish fulfillment. For there is historical proof that every age which has produced great dramatists—in Greece, in England and Germany and France—has presaged an age of renewed, vigorous assertion of human rights.

For it is in his wishes that man becomes like an angel, like a god. And the assurance that his wishes can and will be fulfilled is the supreme source of inspiration to man.

A great play, then, is a great inspiration, and its performance is a kind of revivalist meeting. The great dramatist is one who knows that in the tragedy of blindness Oedipus discovered the inward power to see the ultimate truth.

Yet I have heard many young dramatists explain their present inactivity by saying that in this, the most tremendous moment in the history of the world, "there is nothing for me to write about."

The American dramatist today can



Disraeli

Robert E. Sherwood

know that he has immeasurably more to write about than Sophocles had, or Shakespeare, and he is far freer to say what he pleases. He does not have to look into legend to find assurance of the essential heroism and nobility of man; he has only to look into this morning's newspaper.

No one can pretend that the theatre is any easy road to fame and fortune—for writer or actor, either. It is as hard and as cruel and embittering as any other road that travels toward the stars. But the opportunity is still there—as always. And the inspiration is still there—as always. And the infinitesimal but real glimpse of immortality is still there—as always.

Our America is a dramatic country, in a supremely dramatic age. I hope and pray that great dramatists will arise to accept the greatest challenge to the genius of artists and of free men that has ever been, in the history of the world.

This article was read by Mr. Sherwood on the occasion of the presentation to him of the Gold Medal for Drama of the National Institute for Arts and Letters. Mr. Sherwood incorporated in his talk portions of an article he had written for the Theatre Arts Monthly.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 357)

JAMES MONROE
ANNUAL MESSAGE*

Our policy in regard to Europe . . . is . . . to cultivate friendly relations with it and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy, meeting, in all instances, the just claims of every power; submitting to injuries from none.

*(1823)