

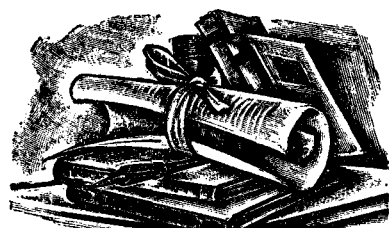
Milton and the Moderns

MILTON AND HIS MODERN CRITICS. By Logan Pearsall Smith. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. (*An Atlantic Monthly Press Book.*) 1941. 87 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by A. M. WITHERSPOON

THE bombardment last year of Milton's statue outside the Church of St. Giles Cripplegate in London has suggested to more than one the bombardments of the poet's reputation by certain critics of the present day. The statue, only slightly damaged, was set up again, and it still stands there, presumably, defying the bombarders. It is not with bombs or other weapons of contemporary warfare that Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith enters the Battle of Milton. After the fashion of David against Goliath, Mr. Pearsall Smith comes up from Chelsea against some of the loud speakers among Milton's critics with a charming and mild-mannered little book, full of wit and urbanity and good sense. It contains a choice collection of polished stones which he hurls deftly and with telling effect at such eminent detractors as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Herbert Read, Middleton Murry, and F. R. Leavis.

The author recounts briefly the rise of the anti-Miltons, and shows his familiarity with their history and their charges against the poet. He quotes, with something of a twinkle in his eye, some of their devastating criticisms, and with evident relish takes as a sort of text for his discourse Mr. Leavis's rather well-known pronouncement that "Milton's dislodgement in the past decade, after his two centuries of predominance, was effected with remarkably little fuss"—a statement that may in time come to rank with some of Jeffrey's comments on Wordsworth. He mentions and answers many of the specific criticisms of Milton—that the poet "displays a feeling for words rather than a capacity for feeling *through* them," that his verse is stiff and mechanical, that he was too musical, that he did almost irreparable damage to English poetry and the English language, and that, as for his great monstrosity of *Paradise Lost*, if the poem has a moral at all it is nothing more profound than that a husband must keep his wife in her proper



place. Mr. Pearsall Smith's book is not, however, so much a defense of Milton as a reaffirmation of his faith in him, and a grateful acknowledgment of the spiritual and æsthetic benefits he has received from his poetry.

The author has tried to understand rather than merely to denounce the reaction against Milton, and not all Milton's modern critics are castigated. Generous tributes of commendation are paid to Robert Bridges, Professor E. E. Stoll, Sir Herbert Grierson, and Miss Rose Macaulay. He might well have included in the list for honorable mention Professor E. M. W. Tillyard, one of Milton's most distinguished modern defenders, and he is more witty than accurate in his statement that Professor Tillyard has attempted to prove that hydrophobia was the inspiration of "Lycidas." In view of all the evidence, Mr. Pearsall Smith is willing to rest the case for Milton



John Milton

with posterity, and, as for him, the poet, like his own Lycidas, still

Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.

The little book may be heartily recommended to the student of Milton and to the more general reader as one of the year's most thoroughly enjoyable essays in literary criticism.

English Critical History

THE RISE OF ENGLISH LITERARY HISTORY. By René Wellek. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 275 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

WHY did men ever begin writing or, for that matter, speaking? To disguise their thoughts, or to express them? To please others and/or satisfy themselves? Such questions, far too fascinating, excite Mr. Wellek almost as much as his immediate and far narrower subject. There are a great many good trees in this wood of his, and he can discourse on them; but he hasn't the art of displaying the wood itself. Certain facts are plain enough. In the period under discussion, from the beginning, that is, of English critical history of English authors up to Thomas Warton whose great history of poetry came out in 1774-1781, all criticism is vitiated, more or less, because the historians, great and small, would apply inapplicable standards. The clearest instances are, perhaps, the treatment of Chaucer and Donne. Chaucer's language and versification seemed barbarous to the age of Pope, therefore it was barbarous in itself: Donne was harsh, conceited, over-ingenious, therefore he did not know how to write. It simply did not occur to the classical critics to examine first what a poet's aims were.

The same blunders were made in judging foreign authors—Dante is

blamed by Warton himself for "grossest improprieties and absurdities," "childish and ludicrous excesses" and "disgusting fooleries." We must remember that this age of Warton's was one in which a divine could seriously offer as a more elegant version of the text "Jesus wept"—"The Creator of the Universe burst into a flood of tears."

Mr. Wellek's book is, then, largely a history of false starts and fanciful hares. Occasionally he is, I think, too severe. William Temple's theory of the effect of climate on literature, though his application is doubtful, has more to say for it than Mr. Wellek would admit. After all, social conditions are partly conditioned by climate, and their influence on the arts is undoubted.

The book has a good bibliography: but it is a pity that Mr. Wellek does not always give the date of each book's original publication. It is disconcerting to have Mandeville's "Fable of the Bees" ascribed to 1924, and shocking to read against Philip Sidney's "Defense of Poetry—Glasgow—1752!"

As a part of its 75th anniversary celebration, the University of New Hampshire has printed its history. The book tells of the life of the university from its founding at Dartmouth through the early years at the Hanover institution; the philanthropy of Benjamin Thompson; and the move to Durham.

A Jazz Homer

SEND ME DOWN. By Henry Steig.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941.
461 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

HENRY STEIG is a member of the Steig family, which is to say that he is brother to the magnificent William whose pictured "Small Fry" are probably not any better than Rubens's fat girls but bear the comparison. Henry has what may be familial characteristics: he can be wistful and ribald at the same time; he can produce a belly laugh, a cynical grin, and a salty tear all at once, which is what his brother's principal vehicle, *The New Yorker*, would probably label The Neatest Trick of the Week.

Mr. Steig's story is more or less an extension of "Young Man With a Horn," a book about Beiderbecke, the jazz Homer, which was not as rich as "Send Me Down" because it was more dramatic and less diffuse. But there is no objection to Steig's becoming diffused when the impulse comes and a little drama can be spared for the sake of talk that is as witty as it is unsavory, in places—if wit can ever be unsavory.

The story is concerned with two boys from the Bronx, or more accurately the dreadful place called Washington Heights, who are encouraged by their parents to become respectable musicians and who naturally become "jazz" artists. Their adventures with vaudeville, club dances, "hot" music, and a lot of inconsequential girls who are at least not Birdseye products, their struggles to maintain whatever they consider the integrity of whatever they mean by "jazz," their discovery that if anyone offers you the whole world the best thing to do is to sell it back to the Indians, furnish a fairly conventional pattern, garnished with old tricks whose use and desertion make the book slightly inchoate.

There is a great deal of the Bix Beiderbecke legend in the story and some touches of Pal Joey and his mouses (not mice), but the thing stands soundly on truly perceptive and sophisticated and generally bawdy conversations and reflections. This does not mean that it is an improvisation from Emerson's "Essays" because it moves all the way, usually in all directions and once or twice in newly invented compass points, but it gets around accompanied by a lot of very funny and very truthful remarks, as if Mr. Steig were throwing in a few hot saxophone touches on the works of a good-natured conductor named Washington Irving, for instance.



Henry Steig

The slight scientific trouble with the book is that there is no such thing as the improvisation described or the ikon called "jazz." Syncopation is older than musical history; instrumentation was beaten to death by Richard Strauss if it hadn't already been exhausted by some Neanderthal log-pounder. The tonic systems are simply a nuisance to everyone who knows that a Mason & Hamlin is superior to a reed-flute—what is the new cult, the mystic circle, of lads who can invent more harmony in the flick of a finger on *St. Louis Blues* than even such fire-crackers and sizzlers as Shostakovich and Gruenberg have been able to make out of fractional tones? And these careful composers usually smell.

Improvisation was abandoned late in the reign of Victoria because it was always a completely awful trifling with conventional scales. No one can think up a decent song while he is occupied with fingering. He might as well try to build a dam or write a novel while fighting Joe Louis. Of course, noises can be made.

The objection is purely technical. The "jazz" cult is funny. The book is very good if one ignores the thesis.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 380)

TIMOTHY DWIGHT:

COLUMBIA: A SONG*

Columbia, Columbia arise!
Thy genius commands thee.
To conquest and slaughter let Europe aspire,
Whelm nations in blood, and wrap cities in fire;
Thy heroes the right of mankind shall defend,
And triumph pursue them, and glory attend.

*(Song written while Dwight was army chaplain, 1777-8).

Militant Evangelist

SOUTH OF GOD. By Cedric Belfrage.
New York: Modern Age Books. 1941.
341 pp., with appendix. \$2.50.

Reviewed by EDWIN DANIELS

A STRANGE book, this! Strange if for no other reason than that it was written by an Englishman whose first book, "Away From It All," would give no hint of what has come out of his experience with Claude Williams. As he says, "I had a rare experience. I had met a Christian. There was nothing I could do but write about it."

For a man who had never visited the South except for stops en route by car from coast to coast, the author has entered into the mood and spirit of the Southland, with its ferment and confusion, its strong political, religious, and racial feeling, and has caught the flavor and color, the substance, and not a little of the stark reality confronting the under-privileged.

The story he tells is as alive as the battles of the Old Testament prophets, and the way he tells the story will make you at turns angry or disgusted, ashamed or inspired.

Claude Williams came from a poor home in the Tennessee mountain country. Destined by his mother for the ministry, he felt no "call," but instead went to labor on farms, on the Mississippi, and finally joined the army. But in the end he became a preacher, and won himself a wide reputation as a fire-eating, hell-and-damnation evangelist. But some subtle ferment of the spirit—a troubling of the waters of the soul—was working in him. First felt as a growing discontent with preaching salvation and "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by" to share-croppers and tenant-farmers who had precious little of this world's goods here below, it was finally precipitated by a reading of Harry Emerson Fosdick's book, "The Modern Use of the Bible."

Always intense, his very vehement lashing out against the injustices which showed his people—now largely farmers, miners, common laborers—more sinned against than sinning, cost him his church. Ostracized, scarred from floggings, fretted by his own failing health, and the ineptitude and selfishness of groups with whom he tried to work (the C.I.O. and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union) yet with his faith in common man, and the availability of human resource, under God, to lead the people from their bondage, he organized his "People's Institutes of Applied Religion."

Here is a provocative, disturbing book, absorbing as a novel, more real than some of our headlines.