

# Lord Byron, 1816-1823

BYRON IN ITALY. By Peter Quennell. New York: The Viking Press. 1941. 274 pp., and index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

THIS fascinating, often penetrating and brilliant essay in biography covers Byron's life from 1816 to 1823. That is, from the violent volcanic eruption which signalled his exile from England, to the days when, stirred once more into a reflection of his old fire—nervous, anxious, almost garrulous—the poet (who at thirty-three felt as if he were sixty) flattered, embarrassed, and charmed Marguerite Blessington. There is a lovely balance in Mr. Quennell's narrative, which opens with John Polidori, that poor, strutting little doctor, eagerly anticipating his tour with the great Lord Byron, and ends with Byron, tears in his eyes, stammered farewells on his lips, watching the Blessingtons take the road from Genoa to Lucca.

The great virtues of Mr. Quennell's approach to a subject and a man so vastly over-studied is that he is at once critical and enthusiastic, that he sees Byron in relation to his friends and contemporaries, and that he tries, often successfully, to distinguish between what Byron was, what he was taken to be, and what he pretended to be. It is impossible with a character so self-dramatizing to distinguish precisely between the man and the mask, the conviction and the pose. Mr. Quennell admits this; but I think he might have emphasized a little more the causes which make Byron one of the least integrated, least controlled of great artists.

Mr. Quennell, though he writes sympathetically of Shelley, is inclined to be a little impatient at the judgment which represents Shelley as angel, Byron as devil: the contrast is too sharp. Surely the truth is simply that Shelley, silly, childish, tactless, cruel as he could be, was always a man who tried to follow a principle: Byron, whose principles were conventional, found a horrid joy in flouting them. I think Mr. Quennell is right in saying that Byron, in contrast with his imitators and creatures, was not Byronic: but how he would have liked to be!

Of the degraded months at the Palazzo Mocenigo Mr. Quennell writes too gently. That sordid time when Byron filled his house with pimps, harlots, ruffians of the canals, bullies, and doubtful epicene creatures alone places him far below Shelley as a man: there was something incurably caddish and incurably adolescent in Byron. A preference for stupid women, and a

contempt for female intelligence are sure signs that a man is not an adult: Byron only tolerated brains in women who were too old to be beddable. Essentially he was unadventurous in this aspect of life, as is shown clearly by his disastrous passion for Augusta Leigh.

Byronism ushered in an age of crass vulgarity in the attitude of men to-



wards women. Byron expressed the essence of it in a sentence he wrote when Lady Melbourne died. She was, he wrote, "my greatest friend of the feminine gender:—when I say 'friend' I mean *not* mistress, for that's the antipode." That would have seemed disgusting nonsense, not only to the civilized people of King René's court, but to the pilgrims whom Chaucer accom-

panied, to the light, indelicate gallants of Boccaccio, and even to that roaring, lying, gustful amorist Casanova de Seingalt. In a sentence those drear and dirty years in Venice show that Byron, who craved and dreaded to be wicked, could be a vicious, incontinent, and feeble debauchee.

He wanted, yet feared to be wicked. Only here, I think, does Mr. Quennell fail to get back into Byron's time, and Byron's respect for his time. He is not well enough acquainted with the religious background of the period. He does once mention Calvinism and its effect on the poet, but I can see no sign that he properly estimates Byron's firm intellectual adherence to a rather conventional Christianity. Mr. Quennell dismisses "Cain" as "that ponderous Biblical concoction." It was much more than that to Byron: and it seemed to the sober, unextravagant Walter Scott a terrible challenge to the Almighty. It seems poor enough fustian to us today; but it represented something monstrous to its author, whose unbridled individualism was never so gratified as when he was in vociferous rebellion against Powers whom he believed in and whose triumph he saw as eternally foreordained. So, through all his life, through vices and generosityes, we can grant Byron one great virtue, the most dangerous of all virtues, if it be alone: the virtue of courage.

## Primer of Philosophy

BRAVE ENOUGH FOR LIFE. By Bonaro W. Overstreet. New York: Harper & Bros. 1941. 210 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD R. PLANT

THIS primer of practical philosophy might have been written as a collection of letters. Mrs. Overstreet, aware of the tide of despair and fatalism that has engulfed many people, offers an inventory of all the things that have made her life worthwhile. She hopes that her audiences will share her esteem of poetry, her views on philosophy, and her delight in the many friendships that can be made a part of everyone's life-pattern. It is a "confession" in the best sense, a book so intimate and personal that one feels one is reading the letters of a friend's friend, which originally were not destined for publication. The chapters are loosely connected, and interspersed with much poetry, quotation, and anecdote. Mrs. Overstreet does not make us feel in every line that she is a lecturer and educator: she strictly avoids the moralizing tone and that cheerful note of: "Just see what an interesting world we live in!" which has rendered many a teacher's book indigestible for the adult as well as

the adolescent mind. In fact, I think that many adolescents would gain a good deal from the book and enjoy every line of it. It would be splendid for high school Seniors: for that pliable age when one starts to discover the world for one's self.

Here and there one might quibble with Mrs. Overstreet's choice of philosophers, scientists, and poets; one might wonder at the absence of Spinoza and Kant; connoisseurs of literature might be irritated by her frequent quotations from Edwin Arlington Robinson; others will complain that not once is music mentioned as one of the few great sources of enchantment and consolation. These are minor matters. More serious, we would say, is the fact that Mrs. Overstreet rarely goes so far as to describe the appearance and the causes of the disorientation which has befallen mankind. Hers is not the terrifying vision of a world at the mercy of humanity's gangdom—a vision shared equally by such diverse writers as Reinhold Niebuhr, William Shirer, and Hermann Rauschning. Mrs. Overstreet's book makes for more pleasant reading. It is earnest, however, stimulating, zestful, and wise.

## Sinclair . . .

*YEARS OF ILLUSION.* By Harold Sinclair. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1941. 369 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by FAIRFAX DOWNEY

THIS novel starts off like a house afire. Like quite a lot of houses afire, in fact, for Chapter I describes the burning of the business section of the locale of the story. As the two newspapers of the tale doubtless headlined it: BLAZE GUTS DOWNTOWN EVERTON.

"Years of Illusion" is not primarily a yarn about a newspaper, although the saga of the *Globe* forms a prominent part of it, and is well told. Obviously, Harold Sinclair 'used to be a newspaperman himself.' The book deals with a midwestern prairie city and its people. It is the concluding volume of a trilogy on that theme. This reviewer read neither of its predecessors and as a consequence may lack understanding of continuity and background. However, the present opus can stand by itself.

Chapter headings are dates, running from 1900 through 1914, indicating a period piece, and the book is all of that. But the atmosphere is not pumped in under forced draft. The times and customs are ably portrayed without any of the weren't-they-quaint sort of thing. The setting features the early automobiles and their vagaries, the magnificent free lunches at saloons, mail-order catalogues dog eared from being read to a frazzle in vine-clad privies—that panorama which was yesterday or the day before for most of us, and a queer, slightly incredible era to our youngsters.

But Mr. Sinclair never forgets that he is writing a novel, writing about people. While a few of his characters are shadowy, most of them have reality, are distinct and well-drawn—the men more so than the women. You like them or they disgust you. Which is all to the good. A novelist who allows his readers to stay in the neutrality camp doesn't know his craft.

The careers of a pair of heroes run parallel and are interwoven: middle-aged, well-to-do John Ransom, third generation of a pioneer family, and gallant young Parnell McGuire, the newspaper carrier who became a *Globe* reporter. These two worked out their destiny through the years of illusion, through the period which the cynical Professor Chadwick labeled: "Complacency—that's the keynote of the present American decade. Well, we had better enjoy it—if anyone *does* enjoy it—while we can."

It should be reported of this novel



Harold Sinclair

that Sex Rearrises Its Indispensable Head. That old urge was little written about during the period (a sensational exception of course was Elinor Glynn's "Three Weeks" over which the Everton ladies' book clubs held titillating secret sessions), but modern novelists make up for lost copy and tell all. So here we have the seduction of a lad by a red-haired wench in vaudeville, and the abandoned actions of a nice girl who could stand just so much frustration and no more.

Yet for a telling quotation my choice is easily a portion of the editorial Professor Chadwick wrote for the *Globe* on the outbreak of the First World War:

This is and will be the temper of the American people. We will talk about staying out of this conflict because, like sensible men, we want to stay out. No reasonable man, unless he uses the German definition of reason, wants to get shot. . . . This war . . . is no more nor less than the long-suppressed eruption of the Germanic desire for conquest. If successful in Europe, that will be only the beginning. . . . If some genius would make the United States of America believe this now, in the end it would probably save two millions of useful human lives and untold millions in property, physical and spiritual, which the sweat and tears of men have built in order that we might be even thus far on the road to civilization of a sort.

"Years of Illusion." A good title. And certainly not dated.

### Double Success

The team of Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall have struck another success with their new novel, "Botany Bay." A fourth printing of 10,000 copies has been ordered, which brings the total copies printed so far up to 45,000.

## Kelly . . .

*DAYS ARE AS GRASS.* By Wallace McElroy Kelly. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Co. 1941. 483 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JOHN TEMPLE GRAVES

VICTORIAN enough in its first part and on its last page to make one suspect that quality may be in the author himself, this first published novel of Mr. Kelly's qualifies nevertheless for the Alfred A. Knopf Fellowship it won, and for the commendations of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, which brought it first attention. It qualifies because both author and characters are full of life, the author in deft and intuitive portrayal, in suggestions more piercing than words; the characters in their processes of negation, affirmation, progress, decay, meanness, and greatness.

If Mr. Kelly's future is as bright as this book makes it seem, my guess is that biographers and reviewers in years to come will say his finest mastery was of the element of time. For in this first book it passes in a most convincing way, not marching, but accumulating, not in inconceivable centuries or in the smothering seconds of the stream-of-consciousness style, but in measures best described as monthly. Months that make seasons of which the author is finely aware both indoors and out. Months gathering into years that rot the stately and gracious antebellum homes of a little Kentucky town, that make decadent the souls and ways of inhabitants, bring "progress" in all its loud initial vulgarities, that kill, give birth, adapt, drive away, but never touch the eternities of nature and the soil to which Pick Hayden and his people before him belong.

He loved Florrie Evans when she was life's darling, when her Papa and Mama and sister and she lived happily and proudly and tenderly in the great house. He loved her when her father lost his money and killed himself, and when her world began to break up. He loved her through middle years as she herself began to break, and as the "progress," which she was too patrician to endure and he too fundamental to credit began sweeping both of them aside. And when spiritual decay had become at last so advanced in her that love was impossible between them in either direction, a trouble which gave him a first real need of her help made a story's ending on a better note than total defeat.

Without once saying so, Mr. Kelly gives you to understand poignantly in this book that time is a wrecking crew, but that there are people it cannot wreck, people neither progressive nor conservative but just serviceable.