

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 Rears 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.

Cramer . . .

PHOENIX IN EAST HADLEY. By Maurice B. Cramer. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1941. 307 pp. \$2.50.

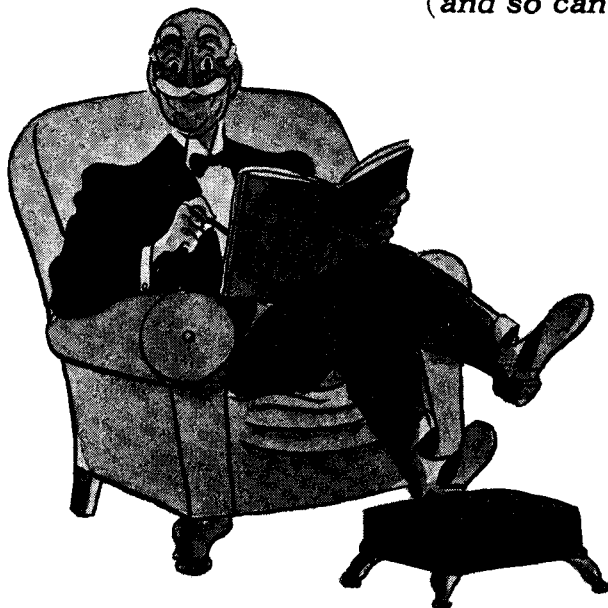
Reviewed by MARGARET J. BESS

DESPITE momentary lapses in to stiltedness and a perhaps too conscious antiquarianism, Mr. Cramer's book of New England sketches proves his talent for shrewd observation, controlled writing, and unhackneyed themes. Indeed, if he had been able to sustain the promise of his first few chapters, he might have taken a by no means lowly place among that exalted company of writers who have presented New England less as a region than as a point of view. The setting, that familiar mingling of cherished past with thin, high-bred deterioration; the Dickinson house, the most imposing in town, yet unable to live down its history; the three Dickinson women, each with a different, though marked crotchet; the tremendous significance of trifles; the ruthlessness that often goes with stubborn honesty and insistence on rights—Mr. Cramer has captured them all with a veracity and economy well suited to his material.

When we turn to the main business of the book, however, the arrival in East Hadley of three strange Phoenixes sent from China for safekeeping and housed incongruously in Mrs. Pickering's chicken house with six or seven ordinary hens, who are naturally a bit overpowered by their foreign guests, we feel on less sure ground. Mrs. Pickering, a bustling, kindly, independent little body, dissatisfied with mere resurrection of the spirit, wants the body to enjoy the same privileges, and she seizes on these birds and their legend as an auspicious omen. The author prepares the reader with great care for the fulfilment of the phoenix myth; his description of the love dance and the subsequent conflagration almost turns the trick. But not quite. A convincing story of the supernatural must build up to an intensity of wonder or belief which the reader shares with the characters. Unfortunately, that intensity is here dissipated by the intrusion of mild genre pictures, some of them, like the romance of Mrs. Pickering's step-daughter and her incredible lover, downright caricature, and by the author's own shift in attitude towards Mrs. Pickering's fantasies. He veers from half-amused affection for what at one moment he treats as innocent and even regional eccentricity, to a rather sentimental reverence for what at another he regards as a profound religious affirmation.

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