

From Obscurity to Box Hill

MEREDITH. By Siegfried Sassoon.
New York: The Viking Press. 1948.
269 pp. \$3.50.

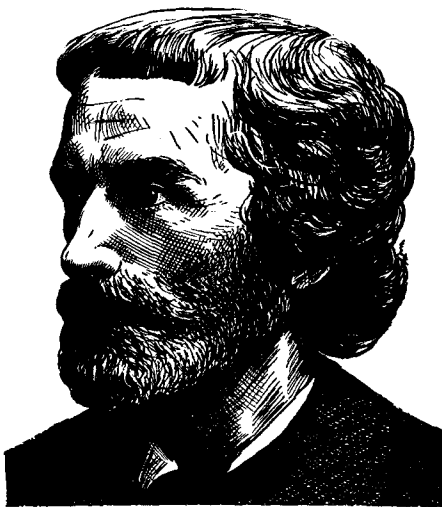
Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

IT IS possible that George Meredith's prose and poetry are about to be delivered from the state of neglect in which they have largely languished for the past thirty-odd years, and are to be reappraised by a generation that was only beginning to enter the world when he was taking leave of it. Indeed, Meredith's strenuous intellectuality, his verbal acrobatics, his pervasive and far from ordinary comic sense, his congested eloquence, his impatient ellipses, and his startling juxtapositions of ideas and images, should all prove attractive to professional and amateur critics of a generation that has learned, from writers as difficult—at first meeting—as Joyce and Eliot and Kafka, to relish difficult writing; to place a high value on the kind of literary pleasure that can be enjoyed only by readers willing and able to collaborate actively and intelligently with unconventional, innovating authors. But if a Meredithian revival is really in prospect, the biography before us will not, at least in my opinion, do much to expedite it.

It is true that Mr. Sassoon tells the story of Meredith's life in an easy, chatty, slippered style which many persons will prefer to the pretensions and profundities of some other biographers, particularly those of the psychoanalytic school. He leads us amiably, step by step, along the path which Meredith himself followed from obscurity to the eminence of Box Hill. He traces, stage by stage, the lengthy transformation of an aspiring young writer into "the proud old poet, time-ravaged, aggressive, indomitable, whose sword was common sense and who could give as his gospel 'Fortitude is the one thing for which we may pray, because without it we are unable to bear the Truth.'" Mr. Sassoon gives due weight to Meredith's unhappy first marriage, recognizes the genial and witty influence of his father-in-law, Thomas Love Peacock, and describes his relations with his son Arthur, and with such friends as Rossetti, Swinburne, Leslie Stephen, Admiral Maxse, Lady Butler, Stevenson, Henley, and Haldane. He notes the haunting shadow of Meredith's "tailoring ancestry," which "brandished its shears in the backshop of his mind." And the biographer turns critic to examine and outline Mere-

dith's novels; to judge and quote his poetry. But the farther one goes in this unusual book, the more one is reminded of the story of the old violinist who, when asked why he always made such horrible faces while playing, replied: "I just don't like music."

It would probably be unfair to say that Mr. Sassoon just does not like Meredith, but it is perfectly clear that the biographer-critic is not comfortable with much of his subject's most characteristic work. He makes no bones about the fact that, in many instances, he is a reluctant reader; one who has set himself a chore that he finds hard going, and over which he candidly groans. With considerable justification, he assures us that "Vittoria" is "extremely difficult to get through." Confronted by "Beauchamp's Career," he writes: "Now for yet another enormous novel which has been analyzed, elucidated, and discussed by many a more competent pen than mine. And now, for some obscure reason, I feel the book a burden on me, and could almost wish that Meredith hadn't written quite so many enormous novels, all of which I have biographically covenanted to peruse—and proclaim as perusable—to a neglectful generation. For the fact is that Meredith as a whole is beyond the scope of my failing apprehension." When he comes to "The Egoist," Mr. Sassoon laments that the novel is a formidable challenge to faculties in which he is conspicuously lacking, and gives others the last critical word, through quotation, as he does on many other occasions. "One of Our Conquerors," the style of which he finds "at times almost intolerable," bores him stiff, and he takes refuge in an-



Is a Meredithian revival really in prospect?

other long quotation from "one who is far better qualified than I am to illuminate the subject,"—the source, this time, being Desmond MacCarthy.

Mr. Sassoon seems to be more at ease with Meredith's poetry than with his prose but not when this poetry presents too intense a concentration of thought or difficulties of interpretation; and, at best, we are given superficial appreciations rather than criticism in any serious sense. Mr. Sassoon is content to praise "Modern Love" as "a great and original poem, an artistic construction of perfect unity." He commends two short lyrics by declaring that they "will hold their place in English poetry when 'The Egoist' (as, with all its merits, it may) has joined Lyly's 'Euphues' as a museum piece of literary ingenuity." Of "Love in the Valley," he will say no more than that it is "one of the very greatest sustained love lyrics in English poetry." And when he kneels before "Hymn to Color," he refuses to analyze, explain, or even quote from the poem: "I refuse to lay a finger on it."

On the other hand, he finds passages of "A Faith on Trial" a little too much for him, and "fatiguing to read as a whole," because the metre "hurries one along, while the condensed and closely reasoned content demands concentrated attention." Finally, when Mr. Sassoon is incapable of sharing the admiration of Quiller-Couch and G. M. Trevelyan for "The Day of the Daughter of Hades," he wonders "whether, after all," he is "an appropriate person to write about" Meredith. Frankly, in the case of this particular poem, he finds "the mental effort required too exacting." And perhaps one should also mention the fact that, midway in his course, he informs us: "It is not part of my business to estimate Meredith's status as a thinker."

Some readers, possibly, may be charmed by Mr. Sassoon's humility in the face of his critical problems, while some may be amused by his self-conscious, ostentatious parade of modesty. But others will be gravely disappointed by the whole performance, and will feel that the biographer has done justice neither to his subject nor to himself. They will wonder why he engaged in this particular enterprise, and why he so obviously prodded himself into going through with it. They will decide that he has written a lazy book, slack in thought, sloppy in syntax and diction; and they will be compelled, on this occasion, to condemn the author of many admirable volumes, in the light of his own last sentence, which reads:—"To be at one's best is to be Meredithian."

The World. *At the close of the recent war, one of the favorite tricks of experts on the shape of things to come was to take a look at what followed World War I and then perceive something comparable in their own crystal balls. The past thirty-nine months have made it abundantly clear that the post-World War I pattern is not to be repeated very closely. The early Twenties saw the publication of many books like those reviewed below—formal and informal histories of the conflict and the events that brought it on. But the problems that came to a head during the recent war are still so much with us that the books by Constantin Fotitch, David J. Dallin, and Mark Gayn, in addition to explaining what happened during the last decade in Yugoslavia, Russia, and Japan, illuminate the problems confronting Americans in the near future.*



"Constantin Fotitch has not only not forgotten his ancient hatreds; he cannot fully conceal them."

One Tyranny for Another

THE WAR WE LOST. By Constantin Fotitch. New York: The Viking Press. 1948. 344 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by ROBERT LEE WOLFF

FORMER Ambassador Fotitch has written an interesting and coherent account of the Yugoslav tragedy. After a brief historical introduction, he recounts, from his own point of view, the tangled history of the war years: the German attack on his country, the development of the Mihailovich and Tito resistance movements, and the shifting attitude of the Allied powers toward Yugoslav affairs. This culminated in a decision to withdraw aid from Mihailovich and to support Tito, and eventually enabled Tito to transform his Partisan movement into the present Communist government of Yugoslavia, which has entrenched itself in power, and which was able last summer to defy Stalin and the Cominform in a way quite unprecedented for a group of hitherto subservient Russian agents. Mr. Fotitch makes good use of the "Memoirs" of Cordell Hull to illustrate the final series of diplomatic exchanges whereby President Roosevelt hesitantly consented, against the advice of the State Department, to support an Anglo-Soviet division of the Balkans into spheres of military influence: an arrangement which led inevitably to our present problems in Greece and to the Russian domination of the remainder of the area. The book is extremely well-written and well-presented, and is likely to seem quite plausible to many readers. It is, however, as its publishers proclaim, written with "passionate partisanship"; it is polemic and not history; and it inevitably leaves its readers without a satisfactory answer to the central question: how could the Allies have been foolish enough to abandon

Mihailovich, here presented as their only hope?

Mr. Fotitch stoutly denies that Mihailovich ever collaborated with the enemy, and attributes this view solely to Communist propaganda and to the misinformation purveyed to Prime Minister Churchill by his representatives in Yugoslavia. He ignores the documentary evidence supplied by German political and military officials after the war, who reported the details of their collaboration with Mihailovich. He ignores the correspondence in detail between local Mihailovich commanders on the one hand and the German and Croatian quislings on the other. This correspondence was available to American and British officials; it is of course grossly improbable on the face of it that the decision to abandon Mihailovich, which led to the rest of the tragedy, would ever have been made by Mr. Churchill without such evidence. As a strongly patriotic Serb, whose dislike for the Croats is only faintly concealed throughout his book, Mr. Fotitch cannot admit that his hero, Mihailovich, let the Allies down. But the facts remain. Mihailovich hated Tito more than he hated Hitler. He hoped after the war to get his revenge on the Croats, the most extreme of whom had brutally massacred the Serbs in the puppet state of Croatia. He did, it is true, assist American aviators who landed behind his lines, but there is no real contradiction between this and collaborating with the Germans. It was to his interests, as he understood them, to do both.

If the leader of the Serb nationalist resistance had been a really great figure, if the Yugoslav politicians in exile (a group to which Fotitch belonged) had been able to treat the national problem with good sense, above all, if the prewar Serb dictatorship in Yugoslavia had not alienated the

Croats by measures as tyrannical as any instituted by Tito, the Allies would probably not have had the problem of choice between Mihailovich and Tito during the war, since Yugoslavs of all nationalities would have rallied to fight the Germans, and the Communists would never have got the chance to assume the leadership of the resistance. It is all very well for Mr. Fotitch to blame the British and American governments for the success of the Communists. A great share of the fault lies with the Yugoslav political groups with whom Mr. Fotitch has always been intimately associated. The failure of the Yugoslav federal state, during the period when Mr. Fotitch and his friends dictated its policies, to solve its chief national and administrative problems contributed directly to the success of Tito, who served as a rallying-point for the discontented. In any truly historical account of the Yugoslav tragedy the Serbian dictatorship of the prewar years should take a most prominent place. You won't find it here.

Mr. Fotitch apologizes for his relative, General Nedich, the German puppet Premier of Serbia. Nedich, it appears, was not a quisling, only a Pétain. He does not mention his other relative, Lyotich, head of the Serbian Fascist party.

The Yugoslav tragedy is not, as Mr. Fotitch intimates, that his people have exchanged a democratic regime for Communism. It is that they have exchanged one tyranny for another. Since the author of this book was so closely connected with the former tyranny, the reader cannot expect to find this point elucidated. And when it comes to national hatreds, whatever else may be said against the Tito regime, it has adopted a firm and sound policy in this regard, as this reviewer can testify from personal experience in Yugoslavia in 1945 and again last summer.