

American peach, good at studies and sports, splendidly fair-minded, and bravely guiltless of makeup. She was typified by the girl who, selected as the best all-round jolly-good person of the year, was awarded a prize known, I regret to say, as the "Sunny Jim." A good deal of emphasis is placed on the sort of hearty religion which espoused settlement work, attendance at theological sessions in summer camps, and carol-singing in snowdrifts.

Somehow from amidst the perils of earthquakes, train wrecks, and even Bryn Mawr, Miss Skinner emerged with an unimpaired sense of humor,

a handy memory for detail and anecdote, and a considerable knowledge of the theatre in a generation before her own. She brings her narrative to a conclusion, with a modesty seldom encountered in her calling, on the evening when she made her first appearance, with her father, on the stage at the Empire in Broadway, leaving the impression that "Family Circle" is a temperate and refreshing family album contrived by a wise and witty woman who has seen a great deal and took a great deal of pleasure in the seeing.

suitably "romancy" word, since King Solomon used it often. All the usual jingles seemed "so tripe." But after the unexpected results of the valentine they were careful to be "tripe as anything" for some time.

There was no monotony about life in Greenwood, what with revivals and showboats, the annual parade of everyone, man and master, from the great plantation "Mistletoe," when the cotton was harvested. The Spurrier neighbors were endlessly fascinating too—the rich Yancey brothers; Gerald, the hunchback musician who hated children, and Charlie, the deaf-mute who loved them; Mr. Dooley, the town drunk; the Leathermans, who slept all day and were busy about the house and their garden all night—a preference not shared by maids, so that they did all the work themselves—, Mr. Leatherman reading Plato to his wife while she ironed.

It appears to be unfashionable now to have had a happy childhood; but Mrs. Topp is not ashamed to admit that, unrepressed and uninhibited, she had just that. Her book is a hilarious excursion into a delightful past.

Mississippi Childhood Capers

SMILE PLEASE. By Mildred Spurrier Topp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1948. 280 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by PAMELA TAYLOR

MRS. TOPP'S memories of her Mississippi childhood add up to one of the most riotous records of the year. The same spirited independence which made her mother, Mrs. Spurrier, decide (her husband had run away with another woman) to leave her well-to-do father's home, where she was more than welcome, and learn the photographer's trade, involved the two little Spurriers, Mildred and Velma, in an endless series of escapades and satisfactory adventures.

Having learned all that the best photographers in Murfreesboro, Tenn., and Demopolis, Ala., could teach her about the trade which she had chosen with such acumen, Mrs. Spurrier set-

tled down in Greenwood, Miss., a town of three or four thousand where there was no photographer and plenty of cotton money. With \$2,000 borrowed from her father she built a gallery which included living quarters for herself and the two little girls, and soon found herself with a thriving business. But her active, energetic life was quiet compared to her small daughters' crowded days.

Mildred and Velma were obviously the most accomplished "little pitchers" for miles around, and gifted as they were with sharp eyes they missed nothing that went on in Greenwood. When Mr. Eppe was tried for having emptied four bullets from his six-shooter into his wife's lover (he had saved two for two other, slightly less ardent gentlemen), Mildred and Velma concealed themselves in the balcony of the courthouse, though the trial had been advertised as "For Men Only." When a Republican cowboy eloped with the beautiful Miss Amy Oliver, Mildred and Velma put their best energies into assisting the course of true love, but that was as nothing to their efforts to help Mrs. Montmorency have her baby in time to get to Richmond for the national convention of the DAR, of which she was president-general.

Mildred loved words, and with a fine disregard for pronunciation or the nicer shades of meaning used new vocabulary acquisitions lavishly. "I hear," she said, discussing the neighbors, "that drummers are sometimes very immortal." Then there was the splendid inscription which she and Velma worked out for the valentine they sent for their mother (unbeknownst to her, to be sure) to the judge who had been so attentive:

If you will be my valentine,
I will be your concubine.

They were not just sure about "concubine" but thought it must be a

Probing a Pundit

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG: Scientist and Mystic. By Signe Toksvig. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1948. 389 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by MORTON G. WHITE

"HIS writings would be a sufficient library to a lonely and athletic student," said Emerson, as if he had once been trapped in the rows of remote shelving usually devoted to the books of Swedenborg. Miss Toksvig has gone through these shelves in Sweden, England, and America, and has come out with a useful biography of a singular figure in the history of thought. Miss Toksvig has not only read Swedenborg, she has turned to psychiatry, handwriting experts, writers on psychical research, to devoted Swedenborgians, and to generous readers of Swedenborg's scientific writings for help in drawing an objective picture of his life and work. Her own attitude is avowedly "nonsectarian," so that her book lacks the wildness of the faithful as well as the irritation-value of those who sneer at extra-sensory perception. For this reason it will not make people rush out to buy sets of "Arcana Celestia," or "Conjugal Love." But it will give an informative account of a tremendously versatile man—an understanding reader of Newton who conversed with the astronomers Halley and Flamsteed, a professional mineralogist, a

Since All My Steps Taken

By W. S. Graham

SINCE all my steps taken
Are audience of my last
With hobnail on Ben Narnain
Or mind on the word's crest
I'll walk the kyleside shingle
With scarcely a hark back
To the step dying from my heel
Or the creak of the rucksack.
All journey, since the first
Step from my father and mother
Towards the word's crest
Or walking towards that other,
The new step arrives out
Of all my steps taken
And out of today's light.
Day long I've listened for,
Like the cry of a rare bird
Blown into life in the ear,
The speech to that dead horde
Since all my steps taken
Are audience of my last
With hobnail on Ben Narnain
Or mind on the word's crest.

mathematician, anatomist, physiologist, theologian, and confidant of notable spirits in and out of this world.

Books on encyclopedists must be written by encyclopedists if they are to light up all the corners or even to seem uniformly sensible. Unfortunately there are few minds (carnate or discarnate) up to this kind of job, so that Miss Toksvig may be excused for not writing the book on Swedenborg that Leibnitz could have written. But in all the fields in which she is not expert she wisely and generously cites those whom she respects. There seems to be no doubt that Swedenborg made important discoveries in science (some say he anticipated Einstein); as to his telepathic powers I cannot judge. But his philosophy—he subscribed to Aldous Huxley's version of the Perennial Philosophy according to Miss Toksvig—is a hopeless muddle which his admirers had best play down; it is effectively demolished in Kant's "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer" and reasonably chided in Emerson's "Representative Men." Apparently Swedenborg had what the psychologists now call paranormal experiences and it is to his credit that he tried to construct a theory which would explain them; but there is good reason to reject the perennial philosophy Miss Toksvig assigns to Swedenborg. It might explain them if it were clear and true, but we still need convincing answers to the questions which have been directed for centuries at "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being." Moreover, it is still quite difficult to see the connection between this philosophy and the "experience, geometry, and power of reasoning" which Swedenborg regarded as the principal means of attaining knowledge.

In 1869, Henry James, Sr., published "The Secrets of Swedenborg," a sample of Swedenborg's large influence in America in the nineteenth century. Like the author of the similarly named book on Hegel, James kept secret what he was trying to divulge. But Miss Toksvig is no oracle. She has written a modest, helpful book on one of the most learned men in the history of modern times. Anyone interested in his *secret* will profit by her many scholarly hints. It would appear that those who are *very* interested and who go through the proper motions might even ask Swedenborg himself.

Ideas and Studies. *Although historical novels are being published in quantity today, there has been a rising chorus of criticism aimed at their quality. A few stand out, like Hervey Allen's recent "Toward the Morning," but the majority can truly be labeled historical romances—for they are in effect narcotics, books of escape, skilfully written but in the end unreal. By contrast, a handful of authors deal with the past as if it were the present and thus build up for their readers a feel of reality. Many will remember the immediacy of Robert Graves's historical novels—"I, Claudius," "King Jesus," and others—an immediacy which arises not only from Graves's skill in writing but from his knowledge and understanding of the past. How profoundly he has steeped himself in the experiences of mankind is shown in the unusual book reviewed below.*

Testament of a Poet

THE WHITE GODDESS. By Robert Graves. New York: Creative Age Press. 1948. 412 pp. \$4.50.

Reviewed by CONRAD ARENSBERG

ROBERT GRAVES perhaps made his mark for his historical novels, but it is as a poet and scholar, a master-bard in the ancient pagan tradition of the Celtic world, that he conceives himself. This book is his testament. It is an extraordinary book, proof that he is not wrong in his conception of himself.

"The White Goddess" is not to be understood easily in this "cockney civilization," which Graves so deplures. He addresses this testament of his as a poet to fellow-poets. He believes that true poetry has always had and can have but a single theme. It must celebrate that theme in its own language of allusion and allegory, a

grammar free of the shackles of precision and orderliness that make prose and prose sense, a grammar *sui generis*. But its language cannot be private or precious or idiosyncratic. It must be anchored to a common tradition of religious myth and allegorical ritual enacted by a populace, and refined into a mystic science by poet-scholars. The common tradition embodies the single theme, at once sacred mystery for a people and ever-renewed inspiration for its bards.

Graves tells us that for the Western Europeans, descendants of Mediterranean Man, who share a common antiquity carrying back into the remotest Stone Age of the sea-lands that stretch from Celtic Ireland to Minoan Greece, there has been but one traditional embodiment of the Single Theme of poetry. The Theme, of course, is the progression of life from birth to death. Its embodiments in myth and ritual that give inspiration to true poetry for Europeans have always had an age-old, ancestral identity, far antedating both Classicism with its Olympian pantheon and Christianity. Graves is sure of this identity. He gives us this book to document his certainty.

The ancestral Theme, he tells us, is "the antique story . . . of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year and of the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for the love of the capricious and all-powerful Three-fold Goddess: their mother, bride, and layer-out: The White Goddess." Let me quote him to make the identification clear:

The test of a poet's vision is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the Island [i.e. Avalon, the after-world] over which she rules. The reason why the hairs stand on end, the skin crawls, and a shiver runs down the spine



Robert Graves: "A true poem is an invocation of the White Goddess . . . the female-spider whose embrace is death."