

Personal History.

Elsewhere in this issue, under the heading "Belles-Lettres," we review a group of books about the practice of literary criticism. In a sense, the three biographies discussed below are an extension of those comments. George Stewart Stokes's competent new biography of Agnes Repplier, the last mistress of the quiet essay, offers us an opportunity, as our reviewer remarks, "to measure our drift towards violence" in the worlds of literature and of affairs. Peter de Polnay, who knew Edward FitzGerald intimately, has helped illumine the career of the "Rubaiyat's" translator through an amiably discursive memoir, "Into an Old Room." For the thousands of lovers of "Little Women," Sandford Salyer's "Marmee," a biography of Louisa May Alcott's mother, the prototype of Mrs. March, will exert a powerful appeal.

The Lot of Abba May Alcott

MARREE: *The Mother of Little Women*. By Sandford Salyer. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1949. 209 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ROSEMARY CARR BENÉT

THIS is a good biography of a much harassed woman. Although she had a gifted husband and a famous daughter, few women will envy the lot of Abba May Alcott. One feels sympathy, admiration, but never envy! It took endurance and character to get through her life at all, and only because she was endowed with common sense and steadfastness, did she manage to work things out for herself and for the rest of her family. It is satisfying to record that like a novel with a happy ending, her last years were the best, the least troubled.

As Abigail May she did not have too many problems. Agreeably and solidly related to Mays, Sewalls, and Quincys, she grew up in Boston, the youngest of Colonel May's seven children. It was her marriage to Bronson Alcott, the transcendental philosopher, that brought her both pain and pleasure, troubles and rewards. (No whirlwind lover he! It took him some time to make up his mind to wed and he speaks absentmindedly of "Miss May" the day after his marriage.) Certainly Bronson Alcott was one of the most trying and difficult of husbands, except possibly for Tolstoy, and fortunately for him, Abba May was much more patient and understanding with his storms of temperament than the countess. Bronson was a visionary, a brilliant idealist, but erratic and impractical to a degree. He had no sense of proportion as his experiment at Fruitlands and the consociate family proved. Through that and even more difficult moments, his wife defended him, kept her sense of humor and managed to make a

warm home life for her girls. "Wife, children, and friends are less to him than the great ideas he is seeking to realize. How naturally man's sphere seems to be in the region of the head, and woman's in the heart and the affections," she says philosophically.

This is a good and entertaining biography. Sandford Salyer has admirable detachment in presenting Abba and Bronson, conveys the two strong personalities, and does not take sides. His text is simple and scholarly and all the details of life in Concord are here accurately. Just as Louisa Alcott in "Little Women" made Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy models for a whole generation of girls, Mrs. March, who was based entirely on Mrs. Alcott, became a legendary maternal figure. (Indeed "Marmee" and Mrs. Whistler are probably our best known symbols of American motherhood.) Mrs. March had fewer problems than her prototype; poverty and a husband away at the Civil War were as noth-



Peter de Polnay—"waited upon by two large Victorian gentlemen."

ing compared to what Abba May had to worry her. Though many people have written of both Bronson and Louisa, this is the first full biography of Mrs. Alcott and in it she comes alive, vigorous and indomitable throughout all her seventy-seven years.

Suffolk Recluse

INTO AN OLD ROOM. By Peter de Polnay. New York: Creative Age Press. 1949. 305 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by CARLOS BAKER

DURING Peter de Polnay's first night of residence at Boulge Hall, Suffolk, he was waited upon in a dream by two large Victorian gentlemen, wearing tweeds and heavy boots and breathing stertorously. These were the brothers John and Edward FitzGerald, like as peas, divergent as morning and afternoon.

One had lived an entirely orthodox life as proprietor of the hall—and become a mere name on a gravestone among the pollard oaks of Boulge. But the other, queer as quirk, was soon "signaling madly from underneath the shroud" for author De Polnay's attention. Edward's wigwags, together with a certain amount of labor among the FitzGerald papers at Trinity College, Cambridge, collaborated to produce this pleasantly discursive "memoir" of the man who wrapped up the "Rubaiyat" of Omar Khayyam and silently stole immortality.

"You mustn't do that," said one of FitzGerald's grandnieces when De Polnay mentioned his plans for a biography. An American professor, Alfred Terhune, had already secured the lady's permission to write a life of FitzGerald, and she knew that it would be a good book. Her expectation was realized when the Terhune biography appeared in 1947: a brief, thorough, readable, scholarly study. But the ghost of FitzGerald wigwagged even more vigorously than before, and De Polnay proceeded with his work.

Love's labors are not lost, despite the memoirist's splenetically wistful refusal to leave well enough alone. He pieces out his impressionistic and anecdotal story with accounts of his own year-and-a-half's retirement into an old room at Boulge Hall; and he is good at suggesting the shape and texture of the provincial environs, the sucking viscosity of Suffolk clay, and the smell of the German sea to the east, where FitzGerald used to sail his herring-lugger. He feels more free than he thinks Terhune felt to specu-

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Seeing Things

"FOR THE FAIREST"

ERIS was her name. Recently I and some of my critical confreres have had reason to curse her roundly. Put her down as the real cause of the Trojan War. Yes, and as the symbol of the agony reviewers know to this day when, come a season's end, they assemble to bestow their prizes for the year's "best" and must choose (as not long ago they had to) between two such admirable and dissimilar competitors in the field of musicals as "South Pacific"* and "Kiss Me, Kate."

"For the Fairest," Eris had written on the golden apple which she, the uninvited, had tossed among the guests at King Peleus's wedding feast. Naturally, every goddess present wanted that apple and thought she deserved it. When the choice had finally narrowed down to Aphrodite, Hera, and Pallas Athena, Zeus, you will remember, was called upon to serve as judge. Zeus, however, was no fool. He ducked the decision, advising the three contestants to hie themselves to Mount Ida, where young Prince Paris, a connoisseur of such matters, would make the award.

When the three goddesses appeared before that startled youth, he was not asked (though this is usually forgotten) to choose the fairest. He was asked to give the apple to the goddess whose bribe most appealed to him; in other words, to the goddess who offered him most. Hera promised to make him Lord of Europe and Asia; Athena that he would lead the Trojans to victory against the Greeks; Aphrodite that the most beautiful woman in all the world should be his. Being a man more ardent than ambitious, Paris handed Aphrodite the apple, even as before long Aphrodite handed him Helen with not unpublicized results.

At the recent meeting of the New York Drama Critics Circle at the Algonquin, the selection of the year's

best American and foreign plays was easy. It involved no puckered brows, no lacerated consciences, no Teufelsdröckhian torments about the Everlasting No and Yea. Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" and the late Jean Giraudoux's "The Madwoman of Chaillot" were almost inevitable choices.

But when it came to having to decide between "South Pacific" and "Kiss Me, Kate" as the season's best musical, I must admit I found myself faced with a dilemma which perplexed me mightily. It was then that inwardly I cursed Eris and the discord she continues to provoke among those asked, in Paris's fashion, to turn apple-bestower. I happened to vote, along with five of my fellow-reviewers, for "Kiss Me, Kate." But I do know that I was neither surprised nor displeased to find that eighteen of the Circle's members had cast their ballots for "South Pacific." Both are so exceptional in their skill, their charm, their music, vitality, production, and performances that each, to my way of thinking, is entitled to a prize. My one regret (and this lasted only during the voting) is that the

two of them could not have simplified matters by coming in different years.

"South Pacific" is a memorable contribution to this country's musicals. Its excellences are such that it must be bracketed with "Show Boat" and "Oklahoma!". It can claim almost everything that such a work needs to endear itself to a limitless public and yet win the respect of those who have a serious regard for this form of entertainment.

As everyone except Eskimos and Russians must know by now, it is derived from James A. Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific." That in itself is an auspicious beginning. Mr. Michener's collection of stories was one of the notable books to come out of the war. Its writing was muscular and sensitive. With people and places it dealt perceptively. It had power, sweep, and compassion. Moreover, without ever being sentimental, its pages were warmed with the hungers of romance.

Being wisemen of the theatre, Oscar Hammerstein 2nd and Joshua Logan have not attempted to scatter their fire when bringing Mr. Michener's tales to the stage. From his nineteen stories they have chosen two, and two only—the story of the French planter's courtship of the Navy nurse, and the love affair of the Marine lieutenant and the young Tonkinese girl. With the same ingenuity Mr. Logan showed when with Thomas Heggen he dramatized "Mister Roberts," he and Mr. Hammerstein have compressed and combined incidents, assigning, for example, what in the



—John Swope.

Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin—"a romantic character . . . and a figure of enchantment."

*SOUTH PACIFIC, a new musical play based on James A. Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific." Book by Oscar Hammerstein 2nd and Joshua Logan. Lyrics by Mr. Hammerstein. Music by Richard Rodgers. Directed by Mr. Logan. Settings by Jo Mielziner. Orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett. Costumes by Motley. Produced by the Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein in association with Leland Hayward and Joshua Logan. With a cast including Mary Martin, Ezio Pinza, Myron McCormick, Juanita Hall, William Tabbert, Betta St. John, Martin Wolfson, Harvey Stephens, etc. At the Majestic. Opened April 7, 1949.