

Bygones of a Genre

"Scenes and Portraits: Memories of Childhood and Youth," by Van Wyck Brooks (E. P. Dutton. 243 pp. \$4.50), is a series of impressionistic familiar essays by a prominent American literary historian and critic. Robert E. Spiller, our reviewer, is professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, and one of the editors of *"The Literary History of the United States."*

By Robert E. Spiller

IT HAS always been the fate of Van Wyck Brooks to be condemned by his fellow critics for failing to do things that he never had any intention of doing. Never professing to be a biographer, he first wrote a series of tracts on culture, using literary figures as the focus of his thinking, and was soundly spanked for distorting his evidence and misrepresenting Mark Twain, Henry James, Emerson, and others. Nevertheless, the formula he presented by this method for dealing with the problem of the alienation of the artist from his environment has never been bettered. Then turning to cultural history, he developed an impressionistic method of dealing with the past, which defied all the ground rules of the literary historians but gave to the American people a vivid realization of their own cultural tradition. Even Brooks himself apparently did not realize, until about the third volume of five, that he was writing a history of the literary life, and not of the literature, of the United States.

Now, with a book of reminiscences of childhood and youth called *"Scenes and Portraits,"* this unfashionable and non-conforming critic again runs the risk of misinterpretation. It is reasonably safe to assume that of five critics who read this book in order to judge it, not more than one will approach it as a series of impressionistic familiar essays bound loosely together by an unobtrusive personality with an idealistic commitment. It is more like the *"Essays of Elia"* than the *"Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens"*; it is more like a series of sketches by Van Gogh than either a portrait by Gainsborough or an abstraction by Jackson Pollock. But it is none of these; it is a new work by Van Wyck Brooks in which

he applies his own peculiar kind of literary impressionism to his own personal past. It is closely related to everything else he has done because it presents a formula for cultural history, arrived at intuitively, by means of a carefully constructed series of sketches of personalities, seemingly unrelated and oftentimes trivial. Those who read to discover another *"Always the Young Strangers"* or even another *"Education of Henry Adams"* will be disappointed. The early life of Van Wyck Brooks himself is the least important thing in this book; in fact, it is not important at all.

What place has the long chapter *"At the Seminary"* in a book of literary reminiscences? Seventy-six letters from the sister of the Polish patriot Kossuth to her friend in Plainfield, New Jersey, the mistress of a young ladies' seminary, surely have little bearing on the story of this writer's life. And why are Maxwell Perkins and John Hall Wheelock allowed to wander in and out of the story, using their own latchkeys and often breaking in on the company quite irrelevantly? Why is a chatty and unhurried description of the long table at Petitpas suddenly interrupted by a comment on the cult of youth in America? And why, when he is sup-

posedly giving the reader an account of his own ancestry, does he forget his Brooks antecedents almost entirely and become lost among the Platts of Plattsburg? The answer is, of course, that Brooks is a painter in words and that this is a series of genre paintings. The artist has his own laws for the distortion and the rejection as well as the selection and emphasis of what he finds in life or in his cultivated memory.

THERE will be more books of this kind, for Van Wyck Brooks has much more of this kind of thing to paint and tell. Meanwhile, we have been indirectly told that he has thought of himself first and always as an historian of the art of painting, that he owes much as a critic to Ruskin and Saint Beuve, that he led the revolt of youth in the second American renaissance by sensitively understanding the moods of others rather than by feeling a social unrest of his own, that his understanding of the Charles Eliot Norton influence at Harvard was acute because he was not born to it himself, and that his entire literary career is a unified whole—the life of an esthetic and cultural critic who had the misfortune to survive into a time that was temperamentally unfriendly to the kind of historical criticism that he has continued to do so well. From the hints that he throws out so carelessly and from the shrewd insights that he covers with the mild irony of his exquisite style, the cultural history of the first three decades of this century may be outlined. Here are the *"Makers and Finders"* of the present.

Lilac Possession

By Charles Edward Eaton

MUST it be spring in a late year that will make us know
How taut a thing is time that took us straight
Who might have turned aside, that hurried when we wished to wait
Until we were time's master and ourselves would not let go?

Will it take lilac after storm to make us learn
What the face buried in blossom can never recover?—
Then it was enough to stop with the rain, discover
Our love in flower and carry it into the house without rigid concern.

This is the bush, grown taller, a rain-soft hour of twilight still:
Here essence shall remain and here endure—
Nature is not cruel though it immature
Within itself what was the dream before the will,

Though it preserve against ourselves what was not merely thought.
This it can do for us who own our house, our life,
Whose children stretch the years of our command, who love not
woman but our wife,
Yet in possession cannot recall just why we sold and what we bought.

Bloomsbury's Mistress

"A Writer's Diary," by Virginia Woolf (Harcourt, Brace. 356 pp. \$5), contains extracts from the voluminous diaries of the distinguished English novelist, selected by her husband, Leonard Woolf.

By Joseph Wood Krutch

VIRGINIA WOOLF left twenty-six manuscript volumes of a diary running from 1915 (the year of her first book, "The Voyage Out") to 1941 (the year of her death). Calling the whole "too personal" to be published during the lifetime of many people referred to, Leonard Woolf has extracted some 350 pages for "A Writer's Diary," that, he says, includes "practically everything which referred to her own writing," together with a rather small amount of material only indirectly connected with her books.

Such a diary by a well-known novelist has inevitably a certain interest. We follow Mrs. Woolf through the early days of genteel poverty and uncertain position in the world of letters until she emerges as an established figure whose books sell well. We also catch glimpses, though hardly more than glimpses, of her personal relations with other members of the Bloomsbury group. But the fact remains that by comparison with the journals of a good many other recent writers the general effect is rather thin and rather monotonous.

The editor, her husband, seems uncomfortably aware of this fact when he remarks in the preface that "even unexpurgated diaries give a distorted or one-sided portrait of the writer, because, as Virginia Woolf herself remarks somewhere in these diaries, one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood—irritation or misery, say—and of not writing one's diary when one is feeling the opposite." Five or six very vivid pages describing a visit to Thomas Hardy towards the end of his life are extraordinarily lively and interesting. They suggest that if Mrs. Woolf had cared to write or her husband had cared to publish more matter of that sort, the present volume would be a good deal richer than it is. But either she didn't or he didn't; and readers who are not passionately interested in the author are likely to get a little weary of the perpetual ups and downs of her mood as she gains or loses confidence in each work in progress and then of the alternations between hope and apprehension as the reviews begin to appear.



—Giselle Freund-Magnum.

Virginia Woolf—"morbidly affected."

On the whole it has gone better this morning. It's true my brain is so tired of this job it aches after an hour or less. So I must dandle it, and gently immerse it. Yes, I think it's good; in its very difficult way. I wonder if anyone has ever suffered so much from a book as I have from "The Years." Once out I will never look at it again. It's like a long childbirth.

A few pages like that tell one something. Fifty come to seem rather wearisome and repetitious.

The qualities which make a great man great are, of course, those which most often elude autobiography as well as biography. From the pages of this volume one does learn a good deal about Mrs. Woolf's temperament, but one would not be able to guess whether she had an important talent or not. And this is said, not chiefly by way of complaint, but to explain why the little summary to follow may seem disparaging.

The "distorted or one-sided portrait" which she herself draws is of a woman obsessed by writing in both the good sense that she is determined to write well and in the bad sense that nothing seems to interest her much except as material to be written about. For an author, she was neither unusually selfish nor arrogant and by comparison with Katherine Mansfield, for example, a likable person. But she was almost as self-centered as it is possible for anyone to be:

I think I anticipate considerable lukewarmness among the friendly reviewers. . . . Oh the relief! L. brought the *Lit. Sup.* to me in bed and said it's quite good. . . . Quite set up and perky today . . . because I was so damnably depressed and smacked on the cheek by Edwin Muir in the *Listener* and by Scott James in the *Life and Letters* on Friday.

Exile's Elegy

"It Isn't This Time of Year at All," by Oliver St. John Gogarty (Doubleday. 256 pp. \$3.50), is a volume of reminiscence by the Irish physician, politician, and writer, who played a prominent role in the literary flowering of his native land.

By Harrison Smith

NOW in his seventy-fifth year, with a dozen memorable books behind him, Dr. Oliver St. John Gogarty writes in "It Isn't This Time of Year at All" of his long, somewhat fabulous journey through life with the vigor, enthusiasm, charm, and wit that few writers thirty years younger, on either side of the Atlantic, possess today.

For years he has been an exile in New York, for he fought what he believed were the destructive policies of De Valera and the Sinn Féin, as a partisan of the first Government of the new Republic of Ireland, and later a member of the Government. At one time, when he was a Senator, he was kidnapped by hired murderers and escaped, becoming a national hero feted, oddly enough, in London as well as in Ireland.

Even more than for its stories of his exciting adventures, his book will be treasured for its account of the development of his own varicolored personality and his shrewd, sometimes loving, sometimes acerbic appraisal of the poets, novelists, painters, philosophers, and learned men with whom he was intimate. What a gallery of men these are who line Ireland's hall of fame—James Joyce, George Russell, Yeats, Griffith, Horace Plunkett, George Moore, Augustus John, Lord Dun-sany, and others of no less renown. No other land, perhaps, could have produced such men at that time.

Dr. Gogarty's autobiography is essentially the story of the rise to eminence of the son of a country doctor, a lad who fought his way out of poverty and into Trinity College, won four Vice Chancellor's prizes for English verse, an all-time record, and was runner-up for England's famous Newdigate Prize. He wrote lovely lyrics and was an athlete; he became Ireland's champion bicycle rider over a course of twenty miles; he owned one of the first automobiles in Ireland. He studied medicine at Trinity College and was an intern in surgery in one of Dublin's gruesome old hospitals. He learned what poverty meant in the city slums and