

Past Unprejudiced

"Modern Historians and the Study of History," by F. M. Powicke (Oxford University Press, 256 pp. \$2.60), and **"Use and Abuse of History,"** by Pieter Geyl (Yale University Press, 100 pp. \$2.50), are two books which take up the interesting question of how to write truthfully about history. Here the volumes are reviewed by Geoffrey Bruun, author of "Europe in Evolution" and other books.

By Geoffrey Bruun

THE responsibility of the historian toward his craft and his public are questions all serious writers ponder unceasingly. How much of the past is it possible to recover? What research techniques are most dependable? How completely can the inquirer divest himself of contemporary predilections? How neutral can he be when judging the mores of alien eras? How neutral should he try to be?

The two books under review here are both largely concerned with these dilemmas and the attempts that eminent thinkers have made to solve or evade them. Though dissimilar in their methods, both Sir Maurice Powicke and Professor Geyl reveal how some historians, seeking refuge in facts, fall

to counting grains of sand, how some re-edit the past to vindicate a present cause, and how some dissolve and reform the past to substantiate some doctrinaire philosophy.

Sir Maurice Powicke has long been famous in England as an authority on the Middle Ages as well as on more recent times. Half the essays and papers that comprise his volume deal with problems of historical study and the other half are tributes to noted historians of the last seventy years, most of whom Professor Powicke knew personally. In discussing their careers and contributions he traces the factors and the influences that have helped to give contemporary historical writing its professional character.

Sir Maurice is a master of the unemphatic British style and of casual sentences that unfold as if artlessly joined to carry his undirected thoughts. Yet each paragraph, each sentence, is evidence of the patient care with which he has sought out acceptable words, and each unstressed judgment is a triumph of sober discernment. Some of his quiet verdicts on men and methods impart that tingle with which one recognizes the finality of perfection—as when he mentions how "York Powell tumbled out the rich spoils won by his buccaneering mind." Or when, rejecting the narrow dogmatism of a strictly economic interpretation of politics, he observes, "There is a sort of dulness so intense that it must be false."

Pieter Geyl's "Use and Abuse of History" is less than half as long as the Powicke volume, but it is broader in focus. In this volume, which is a collection of the Terry Lectures delivered by Professor Geyl at Yale in 1954, one encounters the same gentle but obstinate distrust of doctrinaire conclusions that distinguished the late Carl Becker. He has the same gift of peering through a logical facade and of showing how often a verdict of historical necessity is a personal prejudice. Reading these lectures one realizes why Professor Geyl could not accept Arnold Toynbee. He cannot accept the likelihood that history when its "pattern" is discovered will oblige the inquirer by confirming his prefigurement of it so neatly.

Yet Professor Geyl is far from being a cynic. He insists repeatedly that the study of the past objectively pursued can make men wiser, and that this is the use of history. But to misread or misapply the lessons of the past is an abuse of history. In his final pages he expresses a modest wish that Americans, especially American statesmen, knew more about the history of Europe. "They might not in that case talk so lightly about European federation."



—From "The Sunset of the Splendid Century."

The Duc du Maine—"hot-house world."

Tender Bourbon

"The Sunset of the Splendid Century," by W. H. Lewis (William Sloane, 320 pp. \$5), is a sympathetic biography of a French nobleman who through the years has suffered at the hands of previous chroniclers. Our reviewer, Leo Gershoy, is professor of history at New York University.

By Leo Gershoy

THE Duc du Maine, eldest son of Louis XIV and Mme. de Montespan, deserved more than he obtained from life. And considerably more contends his sympathetic biographer than he received from the vindictive St. Simon, whose poisonous pen picture of du Maine has long been accepted as authentic. In the St. Simon version the Duc du Maine emerges as crafty, limping hypocrite who wormed his way into Louis XIV's heart and insidiously places himself, notwithstanding his illegitimacy, into line for succession to the throne.

W. H. Lewis, the author of the newly published "The Sunset of the Splendid Century," is otherwise minded, and most pungently so; as he follows the career of the young prince he reserves his sharpest barbs for St. Simon. The mood of this new biography is almost elegaic, and it humane and understanding.

One cause of the unfulfilled promise
(Continued on page 50)

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 647

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 647 will be found in the next issue.

FIND NAWB FN ENCWI

AEQF AEKBF NAWB

FN ENDOW.

SDINP.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 646

Prejudice squints when it looks,
and lies when it talks.

—DUCHESS DE ABRANTES.



Import Report

BROADWAY'S contribution to the theatre week was limited to the Theatre Guild's production of "The Heavenly Twins," an adaptation of Albert Husson's "Paves du Ciel." The play concerns a wife who has made up her mind to shoot her constantly unfaithful husband. The husband tries to convince her by means of a long flash-forward that this murder would be futile because, though she might be acquitted, she would repeat the same mistakes with another rascal like himself. This flash-forward is the basis for a lot of fun with the soul of the dead husband, who is transmogrified into a grandfather clock (in the French it was a writing table), and a great deal of teasing talk on the subject of infidelity. Some of it is clever dialogue translated into American by an anonymous adapter (Louis Kronenberger asked that his name be removed from the program after many of the original lines were deleted on the grounds that they were not laugh-getters and some wisecracks not his own inserted). A sample of the kind of humor still there from the original is: She: "I bet you wear elevator shoes?" He: "Yes, but by the time I take them off it's too late." But the atmosphere in which this sort of wit flourishes is fatally polluted by cute remarks alien to the script's mood.

While the failure of M. Husson's boulevard trifle is in itself no grave matter, "The Heavenly Twins" does bring up a perplexing problem for American producers who would import the cream of Paris entertainment. The necessity of transforming light wit into heavyweight American jokes is bad enough, but the inability of most American performers to deliver this special kind of dialogue is even worse. Faye Emerson in the leading role never manages to play the delicate harpsichord with more than one thumb. In embarrassing contrast is Jean Pierre Aumont, who plays the part he created in Paris, showing the style this sort of thing requires—as does his countryman Marcel Hillaire in the lesser role of a heavenly messenger.

Director Cyril Ritchard has, where he can, contributed some of the style he himself so beautifully achieves when he is the actor, and the character of the lawyer is played by Drew Thompson with Ritchard giggles and

foppishness. Eldon Elder's set remains lovely and properly Parisian throughout the evening. "The Heavenly Twins," unfortunately, does not.

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Considerably more substantial theatre is being offered off-Broadway. At the Fourth Street Theatre there is a revival of "The Cherry Orchard." While the casting of fussy performers in the role of Madame Ranevsky, who emerges as a coy melodramatic snob, and in the role of Gaev, who seems a conniving hothead, jars Chekhov's gyroscopic equilibrium, there still remain moments when "The Cherry Orchard" finds its time-stopping magic. The student's long speech about the future delivered with eye-shining passion by Gerald Hiken is one of them, and the dance preceding the bad news of the cherry orchard's sale is another.

In this dance director David Ross has used the changing of partners as an opportunity to get each character to exhibit different facets of his nature in relation to the others. Nancy Wickwire, who as Varya holds herself down a bit too much in the early part of the play, does flare up nicely on the line "A student should be intelligent." Leonardo Cimino plays Yasha as a *vaudeville*, but though his artifices are bright they do not help illuminate the play.

Credit to Stark Young for his anachronism-free translation, and to designer Zwi Geyra for the way he puts a Russian estate on the Fourth Street's small sandwich stage and at the same time keeps us aware of the essential dramatic forces of the great play.

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A less ambitious but more fully realized off-Broadway project is the current production of Shaw's "A Village Wooing" at the Davenport. Subtitled by Shaw "An Unladylike Comedietta for Two Voices in Three Conversations by a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature" this 1933-vintage Shaw goes back to his early concern about the relations between intellectual man and life-force-driven woman, and in 1933 he had the benefit of ripened theatre-experience. As produced by Eli Rill it becomes a marvelous mixture of dry fun, stubborn wit, and delicious ro-



mance. After a well-intentioned but unsatisfactory sequence of patched-together Shavian bits which provide a curtain-raiser to be skipped by late diners, two young performers named Roberts Blossom and Janine Manatis take over with the best Shavian acting New York has seen in a long time. Mr. Blossom, as the strongminded writer of travel guidebooks, manages to be both caustic and affectionate, and Miss Manatis as the aspiring proprietress of an English village store is simultaneously predatory and winning.

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A little farther off Broadway the Yale University Drama Department has presented five highly entertaining performances of Sean O'Casey's "Cock-a-Doodle Dandy." This wonderful piece of 1949 O'Casey has never got to Broadway for several reasons. In the first place, it is violently satirical about such things as the Roman Catholic Church and capital's exploitation of labor. But, more important, it calls for a cast of Irish actors who can play with a situation the way only good burlesque comics here learn to do.

Independent institutes of higher learning don't have to worry about stepping on toes. And some of our drama schools are turning out actors better equipped to face the problems of Irish dialect than most professionals, which dampens the second objection. There were times when Phil Bruns and Bernard Kukoff as the two superstitious Irish provincials became immensely funny, and Donald Kuhlman was uproarious as the craw-thumper who attempts to exorcise the devil with his phony Latin. Director Frank McMullan and designer Henry Lowenstein collaborated beautifully to make compatible O'Casey's challenging mixture of down-to-earth reality, serious indictment, erotic fancy, and comic railery. —HENRY HEWES.