

The Enigmatic Mr. Howells

"The Road to Realism," by Edwin H. Cady (Syracuse University Press. 283 pp. \$4), is an account of the first forty-eight years of William Dean Howells's life. Maxwell Geismar, our reviewer, is at work on a volume that will study the life and works of Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and their contemporaries.

By Maxwell Geismar

THERE are sounds in the air of a Howells revival with Edwin H. Cady's new biography, "The Road to Realism," and Everett Carter's recent critical study, "Howells and the Age of Realism." Certainly Howells, a major figure in his own period along with his friends Mark Twain and Henry James, has been the forgotten man of our own epoch. Part of this is due to the Menckonian orientation of the famous World War I generation that denied its literary ancestors. But the case of William Dean Howells is more complex than this, and is still puzzling. One reads Mr. Cady's biography for the light it throws on an admirable but enigmatic literary figure.

It is a sensitive, well-informed biography, too, which recognizes, if it does not solve, the mysteries of Howells's temperament. In "A Boy's Town," "Years of My Youth," "New Leaf Mills," and elsewhere, Howells himself gave us the outlines of the story which Mr. Cady now documents so well. The father was a cultivated, genial, and eccentric country editor in Ohio, of strong Swedenborgian and abolitionist views, no matter what his readers thought. The mother was of Irish and Pennsylvania Dutch descent, struggling and yearning, like most late-frontier women, for the comfort and security that her husband's convictions almost always disrupted.

The future editor, critic, and novelist spent most of his youth as printer and type-setter for a series of hard-pressed and failing country newspapers. He read avidly to compensate for his lack of formal education; he intended to be a poet in the manner of Heine. Though Mr. Cady's account fills in many gaps, Howells's own evocations of this period remain curiously shadowy and "literary." There

are few friends, no girls, a lingering fear of "hydrophobia," and the terrible bouts of "homesickness" that he later identified as love for a mother who herself always remained an image rather than a person.

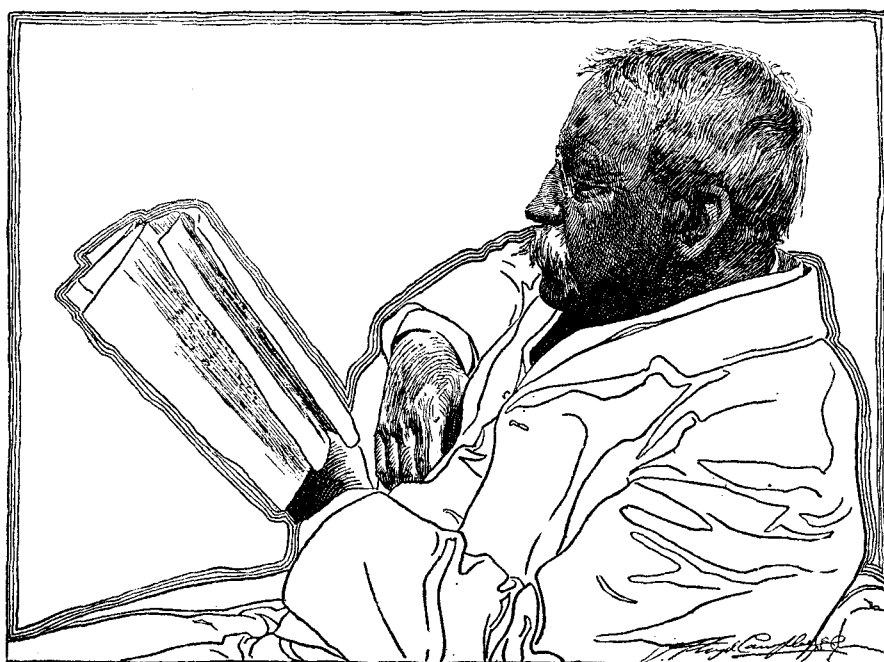
There were indeed those recurrent states of physical or nervous collapse under whose shadow Howells lived out his life. The apostle of realism in our literature, of daily life and the commonplace, carried his own wounds, fears, and traumas deep within him. He could not stand a city editor's job in Cincinnati after he had visited the police court and seen a drunken woman. He did not take the chance to see Lincoln during the campaign; but he wrote a political (and very elevated) biography that brought him a consular post in Venice. Here at last he was embracing that shining and immaculate vision of culture towards which he had struggled all through his youth.

Returning to Boston at last, which was second only to Venice in Howells's youthful dreams of literary fame, he moved swiftly up to the editorship of *The Atlantic Monthly*. He was the friend, disciple, and publisher of Holmes, Lowell, Norton, Longfellow; he had been chosen to perpetuate the New England tradition. As the author of popular travelogues,

romances, and "problem-novels" in the Seventies, he could support his cherished wife and children in more than comfortable style. He was the perfect Brahmin success story.

It was only indeed with his first important novel "A Modern Instance," in 1882, that the foundations of his career began to tremble. Mr. Cady's account of this famous and controversial novel in its own time—and of Howells's conflicts about the ending—is particularly illuminating. For the question of "divorce," around which the story is ostensibly centered, was taboo not only with Howells's large audience of feminine readers, but perhaps also with the novelist himself. It took courage to raise the issue, even if he bogged down at the end—and went through another period of nervous exhaustion and illness. Three years later, in "The Rise of Silas Lapham," he went on to write a still bolder book.

What is difficult to realize today is the appalling limits of "taste" in Howells's mainly middle-class feminine audience. Even his mildest attempts to "debunk" or to make human the Young American Girl of the period had brought indignation upon his head. Both "A Modern Instance" and "Silas Lapham" were pioneer studies of the new "economic morality" of the Gilded Age; and Howells was to do even sharper and better books. He had indeed reached certain deep convictions about his society which threatened the whole edifice of his career. He had already begun quite deliberately to risk his popularity. (Continued on page 35)



—Bettmann.

William Dean Howells—"an uncertain and very often anguished artist."

Destiny's Helping Hand



"De Lesseps of Suez," by Charles Beatty (Harper. 334 pp. \$4.50), is a new biography of the Frenchman who built the Canal. It is reviewed here by Leo Gershoy of New York University.

By Leo Gershoy

THANKS to a timely assist from history, the engrossing new biographical study of Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal, has even more than its own solid merits to commend it. Charles Beatty's "De Lesseps of Suez" appears when the Canal is front-page news and World Problem Number One, with all its implications of decisive shifts in the balance of power, for wise statesmen to solve. It is published when Sir Anthony Eden dared and failed to arrest the enormous bid of Egypt for power, when Secretary Dulles pleads not without skill and eloquence for congressional approval of his policy of blocking Russian advance in the Middle East.

Plus ça change, perhaps, is what the tough old Lord Palmerston would say, could one communicate with him in that special heaven reserved for British imperialists. For he foresaw that the creation of an independent Egypt (particularly if its independence was a transparent fiction) would only give Russia a pretext to intervene in the powder keg of the Near East and the Middle East and add all the manpower and material resources of those regions to its own. *Plus ça change*, possibly, is what the wise and mellow Ernest Renan would whisper—were he to be given the opportunity to instruct us—for in his own day he called the turn with a prophetic and ironic power that is striking: "A single Bosphorus," he wrote addressing himself to Lesseps, "has hitherto sufficed for the troubles of the world; you have created a second much more important one . . . a point for the oc-

cupation of which the whole world would struggle to be first. You have marked out the field for great battles in the future."

All this is significant and of the essence for the student. How about the non-specialized reader who wants to know about Lesseps himself? In that respect Mr. Beatty's work is more absorbing still. He has acquitted himself with considerable distinction in unwrapping the personality—the phrase is his—from a mass of paper. He brings to life a remarkable man,

The people who worked with him and worked for him in the incredible Suez venture sensed that *mana* of his being, the depth of feeling and belief which inspired him, the will that sustained him at the darkest of moments, and the intellect that guided his emotions. For those who were close to him, the balanced union of sentiment and mind, the undefinable impression of authority, gave assurance and security. Proud he was, perhaps, but otherwise pure of heart, untouched by avarice or gluttony of the mortal sins. There were others—and on this point Mr. Beatty carries delicacy and tactfulness almost to the point of evasive distortion—who were rankled by his confidence, by his conviction that he was giving a helping hand to destiny, who could not believe that his sense of service to humanity was only a species of noble candor.

To his critics Suez gave no opportunity. Opposed by England and long unaided by Napoleon III, staggered by technical engineering problems through despairing difficulties of financing the venture, Lesseps did the impossible, recruiting and maintaining his labor force, overcoming the hazards of disease, by heroic exertions dedicating himself to the accomplishment of his dream. When, in 1869, after more than a decade of toil, Empress Eugenie graced with her presence the formal opening of the Canal, he had reached the summit of his fame.

The almost heart-rending sequel of Panama, when an old man, a mere shadow of the titan of Suez, obstinate to realities, irascible over criticism, with blurred vision and faltering hand, sunk millions of francs of other people's money, that fiasco Mr. Beatty treats briefly and tenderly. "To Ferdinand de Lesseps," he writes with fine compassion, "a retrial by grace [is] allowed . . . by the weighing of his heart 'against the feather of

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—Bettmann.

Lesseps caricatured by Carjat during construction of Suez Canal.

one of almost unbelievable physical vitality, courageous to a fault, humane and generous and compassionate, of tremendous driving force. Even when he failed, Lesseps accomplished great things, as he did in that singular fiasco and epilogue of his glorious career, the collapse of the Panama Canal project. He foundered in Panama, but he had set his sights high, far above the vision of most men.