

The First and Last Rose

The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, edited by John Lewis Bradley (Ohio State University Press. 399 pp. \$6.25), record the frustrated passion of the great British art critic and literary stylist for a fascinating and precocious child. Peter Quennell's biography of Ruskin is now in paperback.

By PETER QUENNEL

THE ENERGETIC and prolific Victorians were extraordinarily voluminous correspondents, despite the magnitude of the tasks they shouldered and the engrossing complexity of the private lives that they led. None wrote more, on a greater variety of subjects, than that ill-fated prophet John Ruskin. Many of his letters still remain unpublished. From the material contained in the present volume, which covers his correspondence with two close friends, Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, between 1856 and 1888, Ruskin's modern biographers, including the late Derek Leon and myself, have already made some brief extracts. But the whole series has never been printed in full; and it now reaches us under the learned editorship of Professor John Bradley, who supplies a shrewd and sympathetic introduction.

The Mount-Temples were a typically Victorian pair—rich, cultivated, aristocratic, yet possessed by an absorbing sense of duty. They were involved not only in political and social life but in a wide range of meritorious causes, and peopled Broadlands, their splendid country house, with oddly unexpected guests—Negro intellectuals who frightened their English butler, spiritualists who organized the séances from which Lady Mount-Temple and, later, Ruskin derived a mystic consolation. It was to these friends that the prophet turned during a period of acute personal distress.

In his youth Ruskin had admired Lady Mount-Temple as a beautiful, remote virgin. About 1856 he came to know her better; and by 1866 she had been promoted to the position of beloved confidante. Those whom he loved he usually nicknamed; Lady Mount-Temple was his "dear Philé," afterwards his "dearest Isola"; and into her ear he poured out all his sorrows.

THE cause of his unhappiness, from the 1860s onwards, was the passionate attachment he had developed for a fascinating and precocious child. Rose La Touche was ten years old when he first encountered her in 1858, and he pursued his vision of the radiant, immaculate "girl child" until she died in 1874. He seriously considered marrying her,

but her parents, who had begun by tolerating, even encouraging, his perverted interest in their daughter, little by little grew alarmed and suspicious, and eventually forbade their meetings. Rose's own emotions—she was always neurotic and unstable—seem to have oscillated violently from month to month. She was disturbed both by Ruskin's unorthodox beliefs and by the reports she heard about his past career. His wife had divorced him for congenital impotence; dark stories were told of his behavior as a married man. Rose, who had religious delusions and would presently experience a complete mental breakdown, withdrew into a shadowy, haunted world, where Ruskin soon discovered that she was quite beyond his grasp.

THESE letters, though they touch on many other themes, are primarily the record of his frustrated passion. They make painful but immensely instructive reading, for seldom has a human heart been so patiently and thoroughly stripped bare. Sometimes Ruskin adores and trusts Rose; sometimes he indulges in furious railing against her juvenile folly and insensitiveness: "I can no more talk to her than I could to a fawn or a peewit. . . . I can't reason with her—or she would have a headache—I can't tell her she's a little goose—because she doesn't know the difference between that and anything else." Rose's mother, whom he had originally styled "Lacerta," since she had "the grace and wisdom of the serpent without its poison," is renamed "Lamia," a "horror of iniquity . . . with a strange Irish ghastliness of grotesque mistake mixed with the wickedness." As Rose recedes and the vision evaporates, Ruskin's self-control rapidly declines, and his hold on sanity becomes more and more precarious. From the year of Rose's death his letters to the Mount-Temples are those of a half-broken man.

No one who appreciates Ruskin as an artist and sympathizes with him as a human being should fail to acquire this well-produced volume. Professor Bradley is an admirable editor; his preface and editorial comments are equally informative and understanding. His index, however, is not as helpful as it might be; and on page 10 he makes a curiously misleading statement about Lord Mount-Temple's parentage. The master of Broadlands was not merely Lord Palmerston's "stepson," but the famous statesman's illegitimate offspring. Palmerston had married his mistress, widow of Lord Cowper, Mount-Temple's putative sire, after a long, happy, and widely publicized liaison. To that fact Mount-Temple owed much of his wealth and much of the social authority he exercised.



Alone Together with Their Letters

***The Literature of Gossip: Nine English Letter-Writers*, by Elizabeth Drew (Norton. 254 pp. \$5), unfolds the private personalities of some highly individual men and women of letters. Robert Halsband wrote "The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu."**

By ROBERT HALSBAND

"THE ONLY device for combining solitude and good company" was Byron's definition of letter-writing. It is a device that goes back to Xerxes, but in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, it is generally agreed, the informal letter also achieved a high plane of literary excellence. One of its main ingredients was gossip, if that word be taken in a broad and benign sense; hence Elizabeth Drew has used it for the title of her pleasantly written and eminently readable book.

The nine letter-writers she discusses range from Dorothy Osborne in the mid-seventeenth century to Edward Fitzgerald at the end of the nineteenth—the one a modest woman who lived during the Puritan Revolution and the Restoration, the other a recluse, whose translation of Omar Khayyám is a modern classic. In between we have Jonathan Swift, the great satirist, whose "exile" in Ireland encouraged his epistolary friendships; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, traveler and eccentric, who found letters the most congenial vehicle for her energetic wit; Horace Walpole, taste-maker and amateur *par excellence*, who channeled his varied enthusiasms into an enormous correspondence; William Cowper, gentle poet and religious melancholiac; Charles Lamb, essayist and friend of the first generation of Romantic poets; Lord Byron, ebullient poet and victim of his own legend; and Jane Carlyle, wife and helpmeet of a prickly genius. It would be difficult to find any traits common to these diverse persons, except that all of them wrote letters that can be read as literature.

In her approach to the subject Miss Drew breaks no new ground; her book is, in effect, an old-fashioned "appreciation." As such it avoids intensive critical analysis, trying instead to convey to the reader the charm and interest of the writers and their letters. In this essential purpose she is successful to a remarkable

degree, for she unfolds the personality of each with sympathy and at the same time maintains some critical detachment. It requires a wide spectrum of empathy to enter into the gaudy egotism of Byron and the bitter control of Mrs. Carlyle, the unseemly emotional abandon of Lady Mary and the tough stoicism of Swift. Miss Drew's other great virtue is that of the anthologist: she quotes from her letter-writers the passages that demonstrate their skills most persuasively; and then deftly weaves them into her own prose.

Her shortcoming in this book may be that she devotes excessive space to biographies—which, in such brief compass, too often seem potted—and not enough to excerpts; for, after all, the attraction lies not in the lives of these people, however eventful or piquant, but in their letters. However, since a suggested read-



Jane Carlyle—"helpmeet of a prickly genius."

ing list is given at the end of the book, one can easily continue exploring "the literature of gossip."

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Jamaican Ministry

By David Posner

FATHER on horseback wouldn't arrive till sunset
In a whirl of mosquitoes
Under the thirty foot poinciana. I sniffed the rancid
Garden, counted the humming birds as their tongues
Milked the red flowers.
Derelict myrtle below their wings
Led to the mission porch where I would sit
Now, the new minister's son in a clean shirt.
Grass ribbed the floor:
A paradise untenanted
Seven years, the earth
Flushed with veins from the hills.
And the humming birds, purple and bronze,
Ignored our shouts, footfalls.
My cousins took range
While the birds made blue fire, a faultless
Burning in midair.
We never saw their wings move,
Not even when we raised our slingshots.
A halo nearer earth than heaven
Ringed our heads:
Then birds fell, two, three, ten, eleven,
Twenty at our leaping, just where the ground bled
Bauxite. My cousins, hard in their vigor,
Kicked the bodies hurtling at their feet.
Who would think such feeble *rigor mortis*
A dolphin's rainbow or the last amenities
An old lady glows with? The ineffable feathers
Darkened, iridescence gone,
A coat of mail effaced to dun.
Heavy along the sky a simplicity like death
Lit the dry sun. Besieged,
My hand felt red, my wrist was burning.
I walked toward the house, suddenly mourning
A ghost too small to imagine.