

# The Fullblood Ancestry

HARVEY CURTIS WEBSTER

ONCE upon a time, those of us over forty remember, it was considered sinful to read contemporary literature until one had absorbed the best that had been thought and said in the world. But this provincialism, which overemphasized what *had* been written, has been replaced by an equally noxious concentration on the books of the year, of the month, of the day. Few clubs will listen to a lecture on Dante; even fewer groups will not welcome chatty superficialities about the month's best sellers. Radio and television happily present too short dramatizations of current monstrosities and ignorantly neglect the best work of the past. Book-review sections discover masterpieces weekly and forget them before the year is over. Even the highly intellectual little magazines frequently assume that the novel started with Henry James and poetry with Gerard Manley Hopkins, while students in the colleges deplore Dickens's failure to read and profit by the novels of Ernest Hemingway.

Of course this is an exaggeration, but it is an exaggeration that points up deplorable truth. Though there are Great Books groups, lead articles about important figures of the past, frequent and cheap printings of masterpieces that preceded "How to Win Friends and Influence People," and college courses that try to cultivate an interest in our usable past, what John Erskine once called the Cult of the Contemporary has become in the United States a pervasive preoccupation with the presentness of the present. Both the common and the uncommon reader often act as if civilization were created last Wednesday, as if literary progress were automatic

\*THE ENGLISH NOVELISTS SERIES. Volumes published by Alan Swallow, Denver: JANE AUSTEN. By Margaret Kennedy. GEORGE BORROW. By Martin Armstrong. THOMAS HARDY. By Desmond Hawkins. HENRY FIELDING. By Elizabeth Jenkins. THE BRONTES. By Phyllis Bentley. SAMUEL BUTLER. By G. D. H. Cole. ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON. By Lettice Cooper. RUDYARD KIPLING. By Rupert Croft-Cooke. H. G. WELLS. By Norman Nicholson. SIR WALTER SCOTT. By Una Pope-Hennessy. ARNOLD BENNETT. By Walter Allen. MRS. GASKELL. By Yvonne French. MARIA EDGEWORTH. By P. H. Newby. ANTHONY TROLLOPE. By Beatrice Curtis Brown. Volumes published by Roy Publishers, New York: BARRIE AND THE KILYARD SCHOOL. By George Blake. CHARLES DICKENS. By Julian Symons. WILKIE COLLINS. By Robert Ashley. RONALD FIRBANK. By Jocelyn Brooke. SHERIDAN LE FANU. By Nelson Browne. All volumes, \$2 each.

and indubitable, as if human nature changed as rapidly as airplanes.

Whatever may be said against England politically or economically, BBC's Third Programme and British periodicals and publishers' lists prove that this characteristic American mistake occurs rarely in Great Britain. As the usually admirable English Novelists Series shows, Englishmen still regard good books of any period as contemporary necessities to the intelligent modern man. Fielding, the Brontes, Samuel Butler, Stevenson, Kipling, Wells, Scott, Hardy, Ronald Firbank, Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, Barrie, Dickens—all these are presented as relevant to the living in these critical biographies printed in Great Britain and issued in the United States.\* The English apparently remember that both society and literature are a union of those living, those dead, and those yet to be born—as we must, too, if we are not to go the way of Roman and Byzantine culture.

Most of the volumes in this series are by contemporary British writers of distinction who know how to combine enough facts with sufficiently stimulating generalizations. Most of them are about a hundred pages in length; nearly all of them combine biography and criticism with unusual skill; none of them show a neglect of the fundamental principle that it is the function of the critical biography to reach as many people as possible without violating critical integrity; few of them commit the equally heinous sins of displaying erudition for its own sake or shocking by neglecting facts in favor of a thesis.

The list of biographers is impressive. Margaret Kennedy, the author of "The Constant Nymph," writes of Jane Austen; Walter Allen and P. H. Newby, two of the most gifted of the younger English novelists, write about Arnold Bennett and Maria Edgeworth; G. D. H. Cole, Phyllis Bentley, Martin Armstrong, Julian Symons, and Norman Nicholson—all of them gifted creative writers—contribute the volumes on Butler, the Brontes, George Borrow, Charles Dickens, and H. G. Wells. Each of them contrives to make his novelist relevant to today as well as the understandable product of the past that formed our present.

Most of these critical biographies make use of the new our age has



—Bettmann Archive.

Jane Austen—"union of living."

learned in interpreting past writers to modern readers. Mr. Symons's study of Dickens is a brilliant example of what modern psychology moderately used can do to promote understanding and appreciation, and so, to a more limited extent, is Desmond Hawkins's "Thomas Hardy." Robert Ashley, the only American represented so far in this series, demonstrates how the methods of modern scholarship can enrich the study of a relatively obscure novelist such as Wilkie Collins. (Mr. Ashley also unfortunately displays some of the pedantry that often accompanies thoroughness.) Margaret Kennedy's experience as a craftsman in the modern manner increases her ability to interpret the art of Jane Austen.

Of course there are limitations to all the biographies and some of them almost become as pedestrian as most current historical novels. To be appreciated, Nelson Browne's "Sheridan le Fanu" requires the patient tolerance of a good student listening to a dull but well-informed lecturer. So does Una Pope-Hennessy's "Sir Walter Scott" and Yvonne French's "Mrs. Gaskell." In the series as a whole, there is a deplorable lack of consistency in the kind and quantity of information that supplements the studies themselves. Sometimes there is a bibliography, sometimes there is not. Chronological tables and lists of the author's works are as often absent as present. One feels the lack of a strong

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editorial hand that can exact uniformity without demanding conformity.

Desmond Hawkins's "Thomas Hardy" perhaps best illustrates the considerable virtues and the less considerable defects of a typical volume in the series. His main thesis—that Hardy is "the originator of the modern sex-novel," which is "the special medium of a disrupted and incoherent society in which religion has lost its primary sanction and the patterns of public life are fragmentary and ill-defined"—he supports brilliantly. But he overlooks and misjudges a good deal in the process. "Under a Greenwood Tree" becomes negligible, Sue Bridehead a disgusting character with whom Hardy neurotically sympathizes. Hardy's total view of the world is sometimes lost in Mr. Hawkins's overemphasis of an aspect of it. The poems are never used to illuminate our understanding of the novels. The facts of Hardy's life are used partially and sparsely. In other words, Mr. Hawkins, like any writer of a short biography, must be taken with quite a few grains of salt. He has neither Albert Guerard's comprehension of Hardy's psychology nor Carl Weber's command of Hardy's background and life.

Still, and this is the virtue of even the mediocre volumes in the English Novelists Series, Mr. Hawkins persuades us that Hardy belongs to the present far more useably than Katherine Winsor and that he should be read. Though these reasonably priced and usually winning critical biographies do not have the length or the grace one finds consistently in the older English Men of Letters monographs, and though they are generally less definitive than the best of the studies in the Makers of Modern Literature Series, nevertheless they persuade whoever will read that the past is persistently important to a present excessively conscious of its singularity in both good and evil and could help us to find the way to the good society that is not yet but is still possible.

## Native Prizewinner

*THE MAN FROM MAIN STREET: A Sinclair Lewis Reader. Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904-1950. Edited by Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, assisted by Phillip Allan Friedman. New York: Random House. 371 pp. \$3.75.*

By MAXWELL GEISMAR

AS THE somewhat imposing array of titles, subtitles, and credits makes clear, this is a collection of Sinclair Lewis's occasional writing, mostly journalism. It covers the years from his Yale education (and early passion for romances) to his solitary and tragic death in Italy. It is a useful companion volume to the Lewis letters which were recently published in Harrison Smith's "From Main Street to Stockholm."

The editorial notes, like the titles, are generally helpful but have a tendency to inflate themselves or to describe Lewis's work in terms that are questionable. Looking back now, we can see that he was essentially a popularizer (at his best a great one) of the tradition of literary revolt which almost coincided with the span of his life. He was never a "philosophic" or even a very thoughtful writer. He was rebellious by nature and conservative or even authoritarian by deepest instinct. That is to say, he belonged to a tradition of native satirists, such as John P. Marquand, who need a strong tradition of authority to support their own revolt against it.

Thus, when the familiar outlines of Lewis's world disappeared in the 1930's—the world which had heaped fame upon him for excoriating it—he was lost, and spent the decade in confusion and irritation. Much of the interest of "The Man from Main Street" lies in the disclosure of these personal traits, revealed perhaps even more sharply in Lewis's articles and reviews than in his novels. There is

the excellent Nobel Prize Address, where he defended the new literature of the 1920's against "an astonishing circus called the New Humanism," the predecessors and ancestors of the New Critics today. Towards the end of his career, Lewis was at his best again in a brilliant defense of his own period written in answer to Bernard DeVoto's "The Literary Fallacy."

He was a marvelous satirist when he was sure of himself, and one we could use, as we could use another H. L. Mencken today, to stand up against the new menace of self-appointed literary censors and obscene custodians of public morals. There is another good article here on Negro writers, such as Richard Wright, and on the race problem—far more incisive than the dubious romance through which he projected this theme into the pages of "Kingsblood Royal." For even when the later Lewis's instincts were admirable and his intellectual position sound, his expression was often inadequate: a combination of jeers and wisecracks, at its worst, in a world of misery and social revolution.

There is no doubt also that Lewis's later versions of Dr. Will Kennicott (in another essay in this collection) and of George F. Babbitt (in a series of repentant novels) stressed solid virtues in these national types. The only trouble was that while they were admirable and even sympathetic figures in the original satire, they became objectionable as cultural heroes. Perhaps this was the final paradox in Lewis's career. A member of the older generation in American letters, as Mencken was too, who had accepted the gloss, the emancipation, the modern sophistication of the postwar writers in the 1920's, he was unable, finally, to return to those roots and values which he really cherished.

Among the later essays and articles in "The Man from Main Street" there are intimations that Lewis realized his dilemma. In his ironical obituary, written in 1941, he described himself as a forgotten figure, though at one time "of considerable notoriety"; as "inevitably lone and insulated"; and—in a familiar lament—as a chronic wanderer and outsider. But what strikes one, after reading both the collection of his letters and the present collection of his essays, is how little this writer spoke about himself—or about that part of him which produced his best books.



Maxwell Geismar is the author of "Writers in Crisis" and "The Last of the Provincials." His third volume in this series, collectively called "The Novel in America," will deal with the realists of the early 1900's.