

God's Plenty About Melville

Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic. By Raymond M. Weaver. George H. Doran Company. \$3.50.

IN these days of fulfilment one wishes that some of the prophetic admirers of Melville might be alive. W. Clark Russell deserves to have quoted his most eloquent word of tribute and prophecy. Before the beginning of the present century he wrote of Melville: "Yet a famous man he was in those far days when every sea was bright with the American flag, when the cotton-white canvas shone star-like on the horizon, when the nasal laugh of the jolly Yankee tar in China found its echo in Peru. Famous he was; now he is neglected; yet his name and works will not die. He is a great figure in shadow; but the shadow is not that of oblivion." Whether it comes from a change of taste or from the accident of a centenary of his birth, or whether the disillusioned mood of Melville is consonant with that of our post-war period, Melville's name is no longer one to be coupled conveniently with Dana's but is being inscribed beside those of Poe and Hawthorne, Whitman and Mark Twain. Indeed, we find our Yankee seaman named more often of late with Rabelais, with Swift or Cervantes. A biography of Melville has been overdue for many years; yet it never would have been so timely as now.

Mr. Weaver has done his work with enthusiasm, with ample materials at his command, and with a healthy consciousness of its importance. Here is God's plenty for readers and lovers of Melville. With so much of our author's work existing only in rare copies, thrice welcome are selections here made available. Here are his first published pieces; his fascinating journal kept on his second trip to England (wherein he hails himself as "H. M. author of *Peedee*, *Hullabaloo*, and *Pog-Dog*"); here are pictures of Melville, of Toby, of Melville's mother, wife, and children; records of the sale of his books, of his lecture engagements, with financial proceeds (very nearly all the money he received in his lifetime is accounted for on one page or another); and best of all, here are documented interpretations of some of his stranger moods and actions. Mr. Weaver shows excellent powers of selection. He quotes well; and the chapters in which Melville has been allowed to tell his own story, through judicious use of excerpts from his autobiographical works, are skilful and satisfying.

Mr. Weaver's scholarly method is revealed most plainly in his account of Melville's ancestry, his story of Pacific exploration, and his short study of whaling and whaling literature. Some readers will find a little too much of this. The first part of the chapter on The Pacific is pretty thick reading, too recondite to be popular, too sketchy to be scholarly. But in the main the method is justified. There is simply too much material in the book for the biographer to bind all up coherently and to draw all conclusions that are warranted. For example, the facts upon which to base an estimate of the extent of Melville's early fame are scattered about in a dozen places, and the estimate is never made. A Freudian explanation of his youthful disillusionment is tentatively suggested on one page, and later statements are based upon it as if it had been fully established.

More time spent in assimilation, a little more ripeness and finish—that is what one might wish for this book. In view of the timeliness already mentioned, perhaps it is graceless to suggest that Mr. Weaver should have made any delay. But a few hours only, spent in revision, would have eliminated faulty writing here and there. Even though a share of blame falls on the printer, there is yet much that cannot be excused. Then Mr. Weaver is a bit strident at times. Surely Stedman's innocent "fancy" that "Two Years Before the Mast" "revived the spirit of adventure in Melville's breast" does not deserve the two paragraphs of satire directed against it. Nor does Mr. Weaver present enough facts to warrant his calling Stedman's friendship for Melville "humorous" or saying that Mel-

ville suffered "in death, if not in life" from such friends. A little mellowing might result in Mr. Weaver's being less bitter about "the febrile and envious imagination of vitriolic Puritans." One is forced to believe that this biographer still enjoys the old game of shocking the bourgeoisie.

Mr. Weaver may be confident that there are few gaps in his copious work. He shows no sign of knowing that Moby Dick had a prototype called Mocha Dick well known among the whalers; or that Cooper's "Ned Myers" anticipates "Redburn" in its account of life before the mast. In preparing the bibliography Mr. Weaver has overlooked the Scandinavian translations of "Typee," which include one into Danish published in 1852 and one into Swedish published in 1879. An abridged edition was included in a Swedish series of boys' books in 1917, taking its place with translations of G. A. Henty and Mayne Reid. Then there is an account, in Charles Hemstreet's "Literary New York," of a Sunday evening when Melville came to the home of Alice and Phoebe Cary and talked eloquently of his life and adventures to the group there gathered. Since the incident belongs to the period of retirement covered by Mr. Weaver's final chapter, and since it adds another literary association, it might well be noted.

As a "contribution to knowledge" this work will stand higher than many books by older and more famous scholars. It helps "place" Melville as does no other writing except his own. In the revival of his fame there are undoubted dangers. One is that he may be overrated; but that, at worst, will be temporary. Another danger is, or was, that he might become the esoteric possession of a few, a group of self-styled "Melvilleans," who would exchange cryptic passwords from their first editions and resent intrusion of the vulgar. Worst of all, Melville might become just another American author, another photogravure to put up beside Bryant and Longfellow, every hair of his beard numbered, every fault forgotten, every platitude quoted. Mr. Weaver's book insures a different future for Herman Melville. Given this biography and Melville's works, we have the man, vigorous, observant, eloquent, but torn by unending speculations, baffled by sad defeats. To him all those will turn who love the tingle and tang of life yet who do not fear to think. What a storm-beaten tract, yet how fertile and tropical, has been added to the continent of American literature!

HORT H. HUDSON

British Plays

Oliver Cromwell. A Play. By John Drinkwater. Houghton Mifflin Company. \$1.50.

The Cockpit. A Romantic Drama in Three Acts. By Israel Zangwill. The Macmillan Company. \$1.60.

Six Short Plays. By John Galsworthy. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$1.25.

IN "Oliver Cromwell" Mr. Drinkwater continues his chosen task of simplifying history for the stage. He dismisses all that is rough or problematic. He lets echoes of tumult touch the edge of his action—never more than the edge. His eight scenes are idyls in the original signification of the word—little pictures. And each has, whatever the subject matter, the inner placidity which the word idyl came gradually to express. Thus we get not Oliver Cromwell but a symbolical citizen-saint with joyous leanings in the manner of Luther. Mr. Drinkwater can doubtless give chapter and verse in reputable sources for every touch in his portrait. His selection and combination of details produces a result which is obviously unreal, unhistorical, and aims after a soft, fragile, and persuasive beauty. Such beauty his little scenes undoubtedly reach. The figure of Cromwell's mother contributes to it. She is wise and mellow and reads fragments from the poems of Dr. Donne, whom she finds difficult, and of Mr. Herrick and Mr. Marvell. The constant sense of the English fields contributes to it and the *leitmotiv* folk-song which Amos sings. Above all, there is the dialogue from

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