

BRITAIN TO-DAY



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THE USE AND ABUSE OF CRITICISM

IT is doubtful if at any time in her history Great Britain has been so much exposed to criticism in so many parts of the world as she is to-day. She is a favourite target for free-lance critics in the United States and officially inspired writers in Soviet Russia. In Europe she is often blamed for clauses in draft peace-treaties which she has unwillingly accepted when none better could be obtained. In India and outside it she has been reproached when she has not been able to get the Indians to agree among themselves, and in Palestine and outside it because the Jews want unrestricted immigration and the Arabs object to the rising flood of non-Arab settlers.

This is natural enough. The executives in any business, government, or international operation are those who are held responsible when anything goes wrong, and stand to be shot at sometimes—literally as well as metaphorically—by the discontented. And circumstances have combined to put great Britain in a position of responsibility quite out of proportion to her size and population. She is much smaller than the United States or Russia, but is called upon to take a part equal to theirs among the Powers. The far-flung military responsibilities which fell upon her during the war have left her with corresponding responsibilities in peace, both as an occupying Power and one engaged in negotiations for treaties. She has to maintain occupying forces in Germany, Austria, Italy and North Africa, and had to maintain troops in Java and Sumatra till

NEW LITERATURE

MRS. MILLIN'S WAR DIARY

By R. A. SCOTT-JAMES

THE PIT OF THE ABYSS. *By Sarah Gertrude Millin. Faber. 10s.* This is the third volume of Mrs. Millin's diaries of the war (September, 1941 to September, 1942) There are others to follow. At the beginning, moved by her reactions to the daily events of world war, she set herself to record what was happening as it emerged through the day's news, illuminated by the talks of General Smuts and others of her friends. The result is a continuous account of the war as it impressed itself on the selective mind of one observer; and that observer, as the readers of Mrs. Millin's books know, is a powerful writer, clear-sighted, imaginative, candid.

During all those crowded years she was living in South Africa, far from the main centres of military operations. But one feels that her province is the world, and her parish British, and that she might have been living almost anywhere, except perhaps in England which she loved and admired from afar. Day after day she kept faithfully to her recording. No other work was allowed to interfere with it. It is likely to be an historic document in the sense that it gives us a complete picture of the effect produced by the war day by day on the mind of one well-informed contemporary who knew personally many of the protagonists, and combined in a rare degree commonsense with imagination.

The year recorded in this volume was one full of disasters for the Allied armies, disasters acknowledged to the full by Mr. Churchill and by the author, though she, like the British Prime Minister, had not the least doubt of final victory. It was the year of the loss of Singapore, the advance of the Japanese in the Pacific, set-backs in North Africa, and the retreat of the Russians almost to Moscow. None the less it is never far back in her mind that the most decisive victory of all had already been won, when the British, with no allies except those of the Empire, defeated Germany in the Battle of Britain, and thereby, in her opinion, saved Russia and ultimately America too. "Like the British public," she exclaims, "like

every public—as the newspapers of the world well know—I find disaster exciting." But excitement is not courage. Her confidence was based on judgment. Britain, having held the fort single-handed, now had allies, first the Russians, and later the Americans, and the strength of the Americans, for whom time had been gained, was growing rapidly month by month.

She admits that "the Russians have saved us. Without the Russians we could not have been saved." And she thanks the spirit of Marx or any other deity the Russians may nominate that they are "destroying the hordes of our enemies;" but asks that the Russians should acknowledge that "we first saved them." "If England had yielded after the fall of France, then Russia, not England, would have had to stand alone against a full, fresh Germany. Only England has ever stood alone against Germany and her companions. So let Russia thank God for England as England thanks God for Russia." But some months later, moved as she is by the thought of Russia's sacrifices, she sorrowfully admits: "I see no signs that our passion for Russia is reciprocated."

In every page Mrs. Millin maintains her sense of the tragic drama that is being enacted with the whole world as its scene. Amid the movements of armies and fleets and air-forces, blows at Singapore, blows on Berlin itself, the mounting preparation of weapons in Britain and America, and the ceaseless service of millions of men and women in war-work, she listens to the voices and notes the sayings of the protagonists—Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, on the one side, Hitler on the other. Churchill seems to be the hero of her piece—not a faultless hero—she is aware of the mixed elements in his character—but none the less he is for her the man of destiny. She quotes his saying "What sort of people do they think we are?" and thinks that in reference to some of the doubters he might well be asking: "What sort of man do they think I am?" For her as for millions of others he was as lovable as admirable. "He is, I am sure, a man of

charity to the unfortunate so blunt and uncompromising in controversy?

Mr. Bronson disentangles carefully the several conflicting elements in a character superficially so straightforward and uncomplicated. He illustrates Johnson's native pugnacity, the harshness bred by his early struggles, his temperamental liking for the part of a sophist, his passion for an ordered stable society conflicting with his Christian desire for social justice. This is a perceptive and well-documented essay which throughout makes one review one's own estimate of Johnson and ask whether one is really aware of all the subtleties of his character.

Such questions are raised even more by Mr. Bronson's essay entitled *Boswell's Boswell*. About few literary figures have opinions been so divided. The pendulum has swung far from Macaulay's caricature to the more considered judgment of to-day, which has been assisted by the great quantity of fresh material relating to Boswell which has come to light in this century. Using this evidence, Mr. Bronson views Boswell through his own eyes. "As a lady adjusts her dress before a mirror", Boswell once observed, "a man adjusts his character by looking at his journal". Mr. Bronson peers at his private papers, too, and watches Boswell attempting year in year out to take up the slack, to smooth out the creases, to remove the stains on his character. He presents the theory that Boswell had no fixed personality, that he achieved stability and identity only in his writings. That malleability, that gift for mimicry, those volatile morals, that servility which are the laughing-stock of biographers like Macaulay thus become explicable. "What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet". Mr. Bronson does not quote Keats' remark on the poetical character, but he might have done, for his analysis of Boswell exactly fits Keats' famous argument.

RONALD LEWIN

A POET OF SENSIBILITY

A MAP OF VERONA. By Henry Reed. Cape. 3s. 6d.

One first became aware of Mr. Reed, who was born in 1914, as the author of extremely percipient and well-informed book reviews;

then came the stray, unusual piece of verse to whet one's curiosity; here we have his first collection of poems, and they prove to be outstanding both in their vitality and their assurance.

We know of Mr. Reed's admiration for T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, but he is no slavish imitator of either of them, indeed his talent is unusually original and spontaneous. For sheer invention we can turn to *Lessons of the War*, in which the poet has reproduced the gabble of the sergeant-instructor on *Unarmed Combat* and so forth and shot it through with most sensitive observations and a lightning play of wit—a serio-comic fantasia which is a joy to meet.

But these fascinating *tours-de-force* and an affectionate parody of Eliot must not detain us overlong, for Mr. Reed is essentially a serious writer. His subjects are not overtly "contemporary", yet the spirit of enquiry which animates the sequence of poems, *The Desert*, the personal twist or extension of import given to the legends of Tristram and Iseult, and Philoctetes, is not of yesterday. Mr. Reed is primarily a poet of sensibility—yet feeling will soon get the impact of an alert mind; this is not to say that the one will destroy the other, but to indicate a quickness of reaction symptomatic, perhaps, of the character his poetic creation will take.

The metaphysicals, with whom Mr. Reed has something in common, have shown how such elements can be crystallized, but here the method is to motivate: Mr. Reed's attack is histrionic. The dramatic monologue, the recounted allegory, here passion, irony, and a critical intelligence and boundless curiosity to explore experience can find full play. But in his use of what one might call the inflected "voice" he is never extravagantly rhetorical, in fact he speaks often enough in a near-prose murmur; he can be deliberately ingenuous or rise to a tragic intensity all in the same poem. He has equal command of the long, modulated sentence as of the more limpid, short line. Everything in this small book is of interest, but the haunting beauty and sweep of imagination of the *Tintagel* poems is something to be thankful for in these days of austerity.

A. C. BOYD