

A Novel of the Soil

PRAIRIE FIRES. By LORNA DOONE BEERS. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by LOUIS KRONENBERGER

"PRAIRIE FIRES" is a spacious novel. Upon its broad canvas are projected the life of the Dakota farmer, his struggle against the grain monopolies and the faithless Legislature, and the difficulty of a romantic young girl in accommodating herself to the reality of life. Without going a step afield to fetch significances, it is a history, a tract, a satire, a love story, and a modern epic of the soil. And so interdependently do these aspects combine that the book advances like a coach drawn by five great horses abreast.

Set in the Dakota of a decade ago, prior to the formation of the Nonpartisan League, the story has to do chiefly with the fortunes of Hans Erickson and his family. Erickson, like most of his neighbors, is an extensive wheat-grower. The farmers are at the mercy of more than the elements and the vicissitudes of crops: they face the grain monopolies and the double-dealers they send to the Legislature. They face the small-town bloodsuckers, lawyers, and bankers who foreclose the mortgage on a farm after a single bad season. Attempting to save themselves, Erickson and a few other intelligent farmers build their own grain elevator, only to have their scheming opponents defeat them by buying wheat at a higher price from dull-witted harvesters who do not look beyond the present. But the destroyers go finally too far: they insult a group of farmers in the gallery of the Legislature, bidding them go home and "slop their hogs," and arousing the slow-to-anger Scandinavians so deeply that they form their own party and set about once again to build an elevator.

Miss Beers links this struggle between the farmer and his enemy with the consonant story of Erickson's daughter, Christine. She is a romantic girl in flighty rebellion against her farm life, dreaming of wealth and station in the world outside. She falls in love with a young chemist, Benjamin Paul, who is equally romantic in his ambitious dreams of fame and fortune. To consummate, as he thinks, these dreams, he gives up Christine although he is in love with her, and she marries Christian Lovstad, a vulgar and despicable small-town banker. He is by nature her father's economic foe, and she comes to loathe him personally. She and Benjamin plan to run away, but seeing how such an elopement would ruin his career, he once again throws her aside. Christine returns to Lovstad, tolerates him on the ground that all men are alike, and becomes highly satisfied with the life of gossip and material comfort which is symbolized by the Ladies' Aid Society.

Against her omnipresent background of the soil, so that in its modern way it becomes almost epic, Miss Beers draws the life of a whole agrarian people and of the Erickson family in particular. To the romantic struggle of the farmer to win his crops against the elements, she adds his further struggle to sell them in the face of modern economic warfare. Her rage against the wrongdoing of the lawyers and bankers and legislators is a noble rage; but she is too fair to let it go at that. She has a sense of the farmer's own impotence, of his stupidity and muddleheadedness. Hans, whom she makes intelligent and far-seeing, is able to see the situation in its true perspective:

There is one inequality you can't blot out or ignore either—the inequality of brains. All the legislation could not help farmers as incapable as Axel or Shepley. I think that is the hardest thing to confess, that we are limited by the poorness of our minds.

Just, wise in experience, Hans is a human figure, one of those simple men who draw us to them with admiration and affection. Christine is human also; and she and Benjamin, as is rarely the case with the romantic type, are treated as people quite worthy of serious satire. Their romanticizing is ruthlessly slashed. The irony of Christine's final capitulation to small-town life is more than cynical disposal of her; in it lies Miss Beers's comprehension of the girl, and with it tie up the essential stupidity and materialism which run like an undercurrent through the book. For only a man like Hans, in his superior wisdom, can hope for the future, and in the superiority of his ideals—so different from the material and romantic ideals of the others—can remain true to them.

It would be unjust to Miss Beers to say nothing about the quality of her writing. "Prairie Fires"

has more than the strong fibres of its substance; it has vitality, variety, a power of making its narrative march without slackening or interruption to the last page. Her descriptions are indigenous and fresh; she recaptures the sounds and sights and odors of a farm; she gives us, marvelously, the taste and pleasure of food. She has written a first novel whose promise cannot be judged more remarkable than its performance.

Negro Folk-Song

THE NEGRO AND HIS SONGS. By HOWARD W. ODUM and GUY B. JOHNSON. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1925.

Reviewed by ERIC WALROND

NO amount of urbanization, of flight into environments "hostile" to the true essence of the Negro spirit, can deprive the Negro of his enormous capacity as a creator of music and folk song. Georgia, Alabama, Africa, or the West Indies, is conducive to expressions of intense tropic warmth and beauty, but in Philadelphia, Chicago or New York this spirit-thing which differentiates the Negro from the Eskimo, for example, again struggles to the surface, albeit colored, not unexpectedly, by the consequences of life in an impressively mechanical civilization. Which is to say that no matter where he finds himself, there is color, warmth, fervor in the black man's soul, so that, if he is not swerved by temptations of a nebulous racial present, whatever he does has the distinct mark of raciality upon it.

So far the best index to the character of the Negro is his music and folk songs. And particularly the



Arms of the imaginary "Royal House of Scarpa," from "The Carillon of Scarpa," by Flora Klickman (Putnams)

songs, for while the music is symbolical of determinant currents in his life, the songs acutely and oft-times crudely dramatize them. To an onlooker emphasis is placed upon moods or heart-desires that are relatively trivial. Or, what a white arranger may take to be an "immoral" expression may simply be a restatement through song of a differing moral point of view. Slaving on wharf or cotton field, driven to an emotional wall by the strenuousness of toil or the anger of an irate white "boss," the Negro realizes solace in song. In church or at camp meeting the divine flame of Jesus or the blistering prospect of a descent into Hell, give rise to spasms of fervent lyrical outbursts. Gathered together these songs or bits of folk-utterance make marvellous material for the study of both the folk lorist and sociologist.

Significant moments in the race's history and progress occasion many of these songs. There are, for instance, endless songs picturing the epic flow of peasant blacks from the South to the North. Unsophisticated flat-dwellers in the crowded negro tenements in Detroit and Philadelphia sing of the cold, frosty nights and the general physical disabilities of their new, virgin environment. When Marcus Garvey's "Black Star Line" collapsed the urchin gods of the Harlem pavements came along and dramatized the calamity in lines of the utmost "point" and power. And if there is one version

of the "West Indian Blues," there are at least two hundred.

Of course it is not only in racial crises that the Negro bursts into song. It goes deeper than that; his is a musical nature. He may make a song out of a pal "going West," but the regular, uneventful flow of life also is dream-stuff for his lyre. Even "around the house,"—bare, drab, though it may be—there is provision for the realization of this song-quest. A whole family might have its roster of songs. I know for one that the songs which I heard in childhood are intelligible to few outside of my immediate relations. In fact, I have an idea that if each Negro would sit down and write from memory the songs concocted by his progenitors, or those to which he was exposed in adolescence, there would result the most amazing body of lore conceivable.

As the work of Southern white men, this book is a decided achievement. Although a large portion of the songs are culled from meritorious texts there is an amount of new material, gathered from Negro sources in Northern Mississippi, Northern Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. In that portion of the book devoted to "social songs" the collection is of immense value. Here is rich, vital stuff—"Stagolee," "Honey, Take a One on Me," "Railroad Bill,"—exploits of a gay highwayman, a characteristic love melody, and the rovings of a race-track "rounder." In the work songs there is "The Grade Song."

Well, I tole my captain my feet wus cold,
"Po' water on fire, let wheelers roll!"

Told my captain my han's wus cold.
"God damn yo' hands, let the wheelers roll!"

The volume is marred slightly by an attitude, which I honestly believe is unconscious, to arrive at ethnic truths regarding the Negro which at times are pitifully absurd. The interpretations for the most part are academic and intrusive. Songs of subtlety and sophistication are held down to a precious minimum.

To me, however, the best thing about this book is that it richly illustrates the enormity of lore awaiting the energy and awakening of the negro scholar and folk lorist. For it is more or less common property in these United States today that if you really want to get to the heart and spirit of the black people you must do it through the medium of one of their own.

Rambles in London

RAMBLES IN OLD LONDON. By GEORGE BRYON GORDON. Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs. 1924.

A LOITERER IN LONDON. By HELEN W. HENDERSON. New York: George H. Doran. 1924. \$5.

Reviewed by FRANK V. MORLEY

LONDON! It is a fine town, as Mr. Masfield says in a song, and I know not how many million Cockneys, transatlantic and native, echo in their hearts. Everything else apart, as a city—as a stupendous outcome, at once a blot and glory of man's handiwork—it has the inestimable advantage of being old, while yet alive; of being very actively alive, while of amazing age. Rabbi Ben Ezra speaks from its temples, nursery rhymes clang out from its church-bells. It is the most familiar city of all; it has known everyone, and yet we call it by nicknames—some say, "the village"; others, "town"; others, "the city"; others, "my old lady London." London is an ale-wife, full-bosomed, red-faced, "forking to yer, strite"; else she is a dowager, bright-eyed, hook-nosed, loving a word of scandal; else—but there are far too many Londons to enumerate. The last word will never be said, even of London at one given moment.

Dr. Gordon's book is full of genial talk, but with a basis of sound scholarship that makes it doubly attractive; and his pictures are all that good photographs can be, when carefully selected and well annotated. Miss Henderson, too, relies on photographs; chooses them well, and talks about them very pleasantly. Her "Loiterer" series inevitably suggests comparison with Mr. E. V. Lucas's "Wanderer" books. For effortless ease of communication, for out of the way knowledge and understanding of human oddity and charm, it is difficult to measure up to that born *raconteur*. Yet Miss Henderson is sure and ready as a guide; she knows, if not the oldest places in present-day London, the places that the majority of people want to see. I would trust myself to her if I did not know the city, and desired to study it.

The Religion of a Spectator

THE RELIGION OF A SKEPTIC. By JOHN COWPER POWYS. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1925. \$1.

Reviewed by ADRIAN RICHT

THE religion of our fathers, rigidly moral or partaking of the "sad reverence" which Arnold believed was the ultimate Nirvana of what Hellenists remained in his belated century, was a distinctly personal emotion, upon which no social concept intruded. Salvation or ecstasy equally were cordons between the individual micro-soul and God. Our own day with its widening and enriching of the social consciousness, largely the result of our new knowledge of heredity and psychology, has brought to some churches another interpretation of the faith. St. Marks-in-the-Bouerie and the Community Church on Park Avenue are two of its striking examples in this city (though in the former, it is true, other disassociated elements commingle). The new emphasis has travelled rapidly, finding many refuges; at any rate, hardly a day passes that we are not called upon to excommunicate another borer from within.

Against this latter necessarily temporal and transient corruption of an ephemeral and personal emotion, John Cowper Powys directs the burden of his protest, correctly recognizing the derivation of his religion from the personal or theological wing, which, nevertheless, he believes creaky and cumbersome now that science has outmoded it. He wishes neither theological philosophy nor sociological philosophy to preoccupy his mind—no philosophy at all, in fact, and no precise thought or feeling that might disturb the balance of his protoplasmic mysticism. That is really the reason that neither of the present religious systems satisfies him. He represents the new spirit of the new age, which many believe died with Victoria. He is the Dilletante. Just as the often subtle and profound transcendentalism of the social Christian utterly escapes him, the meaning of the label he has applied to himself is completely at variance with his representation, for what he has given us is the Religion of a Spectator.

His book will be praised by the great number of warm-hearted, vaguely feeling *litterati* who prefer to have their emotions and write their poems in the dark. This warmth of feeling, this dizzy vagueness always just about to sweep one's emotions into a devastating wave—the reviewer checks himself from determining without further ado, the difference between this Ecstatic Wonder and ordinary sentimentality, at any rate as represented here. He recognizes, of course, the validity of a certain mood that might deserve this name, and is equally assured that it derives from a certain condition of the nervous system, which may or may not be normal, according to what standards one has; but this particular neurosis is not the one which Powys would cultivate. This latter is something more puerile, the desire of the jaded to be thrilled, an overstimulated dizziness mistaken for contemplation, something to be distinguished as shallow enjoyment from profound appreciation.

Consequently this is not a book to which one may apply one's philosophical prejudices, or in which one may seek implications of such a nature. Mr. Powys is repeatedly arbitrary beyond the possibility of discussion, as is in the nature of his religion, and also as in the nature of his religion, he asserts almost nothing. Science he accepts with the transcendentalist's condescension; and he ends with believing very, very little. G. K. Chesterton would find a malicious pleasure in writing about this religion, for he would see in it another example of the tendency of a "skeptical" attitude to disintegrate utterly into vagueness more intolerable than mere unbelief.

He would be wrong once more in taking Mr. Powys at his own valuation. There is nothing more profound and inherently steeped with religious experience than true skepticism, which takes the measure of reality, and feels its way to the light. It is a cult far richer in philosophic devotees than is generally recognized. Modern biology and psychology discover in Hume and Berkeley and Santayana the incompetent but inspiring prophets of the order. Individual experience, experiment, and introspection leaven the field. Powys's skepticism is not tapped from any of these sources; indeed, it derives, confessedly, from the diletantism of Anatole France, and between this and philosophic skepticism there is a great gulf.

The BOWLING GREEN

A Golden String

HERE and there, leavened in among lumpy masses of populace, are those to whom the name of the late Thomas Bird Mosher carries a special vibration. Mr. Mosher spent more than thirty years in betrothing books and readers to one another; like the zooming bumble-bee and with a similar hum of ecstasy he sped from one mind to the next, setting the whole garden in a lively state of cross-fertilization. Some of us feared that this pollinating service of his would end with his death, two years ago. But it is a happiness to remark that a sagacious publisher has had the good sense to re-issue, at a price within the reach of any properly parsimonious devotee, the famous twenty volumes of the *Bibelot*.* This new edition, an exact facsimile of the original format, is Mosher's testament, both the greater and the less as his friend Villon would have said. These are the twenty books—yes, and duly stamped in black and red—that any clerk of Oxford would be glad to have at the head of his couch.

"The resurrectionist Mosher" his kinsprout Billy Reedy called him. Aye, how many exquisite things he disinterred, and how far ahead of the thundering herd to see the good things coming. In one of his crisp little prefaces he spoke of "that saving remnant who when they see a good thing know it for a fact at first sight." As early as 1900 he was hailing the Irish literary renaissance in Yeats, Lionel Johnson, Moira O'Neill and others; and coming to the defence of *vers libre*. It was in those little grey-blue *Bibelots*, chance-encountered in college days, that I first met such people as Fiona Macleod, Francis Thompson, Synge, Baudelaire, H. W. Nevinson, William Watson, Arthur Upson, Richard Jeffries, Arthur Symons, Alexander Smith . . . one could carry on the list *ad lib*. What was there in this hardy sea-bred uncolleged downeaster that made him open so many magic portholes? He had the pure genius of book-fancy; an uneducated man, as uneducated as Chaucer and Lamb and Conrad; and I like to think that when he took Aldus's device for himself there was some memory of the time when an anchor meant more to him than an emblem printed on a title-page.

I like to think of the good luck of the people who are going to have the fun of learning, in this popularized *Bibelot*, something of the extraordinary thrills that literature can give. I think it is not extravagant to say that as a collection of a certain kind of delicacies, this cargo of Mosher's is unrivalled. I suppose it is the most sentimental omnibus that ever creaked through the cypress groves of Helicon. Like all men of robust, gamesome, and carnal taste, Mosher had a special taste for the divine melancholies of ink. Gently tweaked by subscribers for his penseroso strain, he replied "We shall prove that a humorous *Bibelot* is not, as we have been informed, out of our power to produce." But, speaking from memory, I believe he exhumed only the somewhat Scollay Squareish hilarities of James Russell Lowell's operetta about the fish-ball. Its title, "The Pescebello," is the best of it.

I think indeed that a too skittish and sprightly *Bibelot* would have been out of the picture. Mosher's sentiment was of the high and fiery kind, the surplus of some inward biology that made him the rare Elizabethan he is said to have been. He was by no means the indiscriminating all-swallower; his critical gusto was nipping and choice; in those brief prefaces you will find many a live irony, many a graceful and memorable phrase. The particular task that he set himself in the *Bibelot* was, moreover, not prone to casual mirth. He was the seeker among "spent fames and fallen lights," the executor of unfulfilled renowns. The poets he loved were those who were "torches waved with fitful splendor over the gulfs of our blackness."

Take it in beam and sheer, the *Bibelot* is an anatomy of melancholy. It has been called an encyclopædia of the literature of rapture, but it is that kind of rapture which is so charmingly indistinguish-

*THE BIBELOT: A Reprint of Poetry and Prose for Book Lovers, chosen in part from scarce editions and sources not generally known. New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co. 20 volumes and Index; by subscription, \$26.75.

able from despair. Mosher loved the dark-robed Muse: he imprisoned her soft hand and let her rave; he fed deep upon her peerless eyes. He was the prince of editors: he did not come to his task until he had tried other ways of life and found them dusty. He was almost forty when he began publishing, and what did he begin with? Meredith's "Modern Love!" Think of it, gentles. Would not that have looked like a lee shore to most bookmen in Portland, *arida nutrix* of publishers? But it was what he called the "precious minims" that interested him. There was in him more than the legal ½ of one per cent of Hippocrene. In 1895 he began his *Bibelot* and carried it through monthly numbers for twenty years. As editor he never obtruded himself. When he died I don't think there was a newspaper in America that had a photo of him available in its files. He was the potential author of one of the most fascinating autobiographies that were never written.

So it was that there came to us, from what has been called the stern and hidebound coast, this most personal and luxurious of anthologies. These twenty little grey briquettes pile up into a monument. He was always, in the phrase he loved to apply to his favorite writers, "touched to finest issues." He knew lapidary work when he saw it, and disregarded the young lions of the press. Once he spotted a poem written by a contributor to the old Bowling Green. At once he wrote for permission to reprint it in his catalogue. "It is one of the few things," he said, "that to me seem almost absolutely perfect." May I tell you, without breach of manners, what it was? Life is very short anyhow for paying one's respect to the things that need admiration. The poem was "Night" by William Rose Benét.

In these twenty volumes there is enough material even for those of us who never knew him to guess fairly closely into Mosher's own tastes. He was all for "songs gotten of the immediate soul, instant from the vital fount of things." And however sharp his taste for the fragile and lovely, there was surely a rich pulse of masculine blood in his choices. He was often accused of piracy. If it be piracy to take home a ragged waif of literature found lonely by the highway, to clothe her in the best you have and find her rich and generous friends—if this be piracy, then let any other publisher who has never plighted a little in the Public Domain cast the first Stone and Kimball. The little upstairs fireside on Exchange Street, Portland, is one of the most honorable shrines that New England can offer to the beadsman of beauty.

They pile up, I repeat, into a monument that any man might envy, these twenty little fat books. No one reader will agree with all Mosher's choices, but surely never did any editor of genius ramble with so happy an eye among the hedgeflowers of literature. A Scottish critic has said there is only one enduring test of a book: is it aromatic? These beautiful books, from beginning to end, are fresh with strange aroma and feed more senses than the eye. Words of Arthur Upson's, printed here by Mosher, describe them:—

Wine that was spilt in haste
Arising in fumes more precious;
Garlands that fell forgot
Rooting to wondrous bloom;
Youth that would flow to waste
Pausing in pool-green valleys—
And passion that lasted not
Surviving the voiceless tomb!

The *Bibelot* began and ended with selections from William Blake. And like Blake, Mosher gave us the end of a golden string.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

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