

## Breaking the Codes

*SECRET AND URGENT.* By Fletcher Pratt, Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Co. 1939. \$3.75.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

CRYPTOGRAMS of all sorts are more popular than ever before, as the puzzle-corners of newspapers attest. Poe thought he was doing a good job on the cipher in "The Gold Bug," and so he was, for the reading public of his time—but any contemporary puzzle-corner expert could crack that particular message with very little difficulty. Now in "Secret and Urgent," Mr. Pratt gives us a readable, chatty, and expert account of codes and ciphers through the ages. It is full of good stories, it is clear, it goes from Lysander of Sparta to the wreck of the L-49, and it is likely to start the casual reader writing down strange groups of jumbled letters on his scratch-pad, just to see if, after he's gotten the blame thing enciphered, he'll be able to read it himself. After that, the next step is to get in touch with another cipher fan—and, after that, your wife begins to complain that you're never on time for dinner.

The Rosetta Stone, the Bacon-Shakespeare imbroglia, the "lightning gibberish" of the German radio-station at Nauen, thieves' codes and Nihilist ciphers and the Great Cipher of Louis XIV—these are a few of the high spots touched upon in Mr. Pratt's entertaining account. On the solid side, there is a lucid explanation, with examples, of the theory and practice of various types of ciphers, from the simplest substitution cipher to the Pinwheel or Disc cipher, with its complications and difficulties. The pig-pen, the Bacon bilateral, the Vignere tableau, the Kasiski method of decipherment—the names alone are worth the price of admission. Through troubled times and normal the world's chancelleries and war-departments keep on with their ciphers and their code-books. And no sooner has man's ingenuity devised an apparently unbreakable cipher than man's ingenuity devises a method of decipherment. It was so in the last war, it will be so in the next. But the secret struggle goes on. You must be able to convey information to your own side so the other side won't know it. You can shave a slave's head and paint the message on his skull, you can jumble sounds on the radio—the problem is still the same. The small boy talks pig-Latin, the weary head of a bureau fags his brain over gibbering letter-groups—they are brothers under the skin. But, now and then, a broken cipher may alter history. And it is this fascination of the secret—and the fascination of attempting to unravel a secret—to which "Secret and Urgent" appeals.

The appendix will prove of great assistance to the amateur cryptographer. But the average reader, if there is such a

beast, will read the book for the story and be well repaid. I am only sorry, for personal and selfish reasons, that Mr. Pratt did not see fit to include a brief description of the code-room of the United States Department of State, during the late unpleasantness. For it harbored, at various times, not only myself but the gentleman now known as Jav Franklin, and, as I am reliably informed, Mr. James Thurber. Yet, America did win the war.

## Fall of a Dynasty

*THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION, 1688-1689.* By George Macaulay Trevelyan. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

THIS is a brief and discriminating eulogy of the "Glorious Revolution" in which Whigs and Tories, Dissenters and High Churchmen combined to expel James II and set up the Protestant succession and the rule of Parliament. Professor Trevelyan indignantly rejects the theory that the coup d'état which seated William and Mary on the throne was exclusively aristocratic. Through the "luck" of James II's peculiar temperament, he believes, all patriotic Englishmen were united in a common opposition to royal tyranny and papist aggression, and thus were able to achieve their unique and happy revolution, at once liberal and conservative, confirming liberty and inculcating respect for law. Under this settlement of 1689, unchanged in its essentials, he points out, England has flourished while other nations have lost their less ancient liberties.

No one is better qualified to write of the revolution of 1689 than Professor Trevelyan. In the crisp, brisk narrative which condenses the story of the fall of a dynasty into a hundred and seventy small pages, one acknowledges the hand of a master historian. One hesitates even to suggest that the fear of French aggression may not have had quite as much importance for the average Englishman in 1688 as is implied. The opening and closing generalizations are rounded with such eloquence and Olympian authority that one is almost persuaded that the "revolution" whereby the English ruling class closed its ranks and consolidated its power really was glorious. Perhaps an illustrious shade in the historian's heaven might deprecate his grand-nephew's wistfulness over "that blessed breathing space between the English and the French revolutions." T. B. Macaulay always held that it was the duty of a liberal to keep fifty years ahead of current Tory ideals. But Macaulay might be moved to join with many living Englishmen in sighing for the brave days when a government whose abject foreign policy endangered the safety of Europe was kicked out of office, even though it took a revolution.



Stendhal dancing in a public square—drawn by Alfred de Musset

## Beyle and Posterity

*STENDHAL.* By F. C. Green. New York: The Macmillan Co. (Cambridge University Press.) 1939. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JAMES ORRICK

"I AM taking out a ticket in a lottery the winning number of which is 1935," declared Stendhal, in Professor Green's rather elliptical translation. (Later—in the last sentence of this rather diffuse study—he quotes the original: "dont le gros lot se réduit à ceci: être lu en 1935.") Only last year, in 1938, the last volume of the definitive edition of Stendhal's works appeared. Now comes a book by the Drapers Professor of French at the University of Cambridge, and well known authority on the French novel, which is essentially a commentary on the complete life and works of Henri Beyle.

Stendhal, as he preferred to call himself and as one cannot help thinking of him, did not have to wait until 1935 to be read, nor even to be recognized as a genius. When "La Chartreuse de Parme" appeared it was called, by no less a reviewer than Balzac, "un livre où le sublime éclate de chapitre en chapitre." But, although Professor Green can say: "Le Rouge et le Noir" and 'La Chartreuse de Parme' have one thing in common. Both possess to a high degree the esthetic quality called unity of tone"—nevertheless Stendhal's two best-known works differ from each other and from the rest of his writings enough to elude any comprehensive formula until every fact, every shade has been felt and weighed. It might almost be said that Stendhal could not be understood by anyone who had not also read Proust. And in this sense he has had to wait.

Professor Green's study possesses intelligence, sympathy, and, of course, eru-

dition of the first water. There are many passages of the most illuminating kind of critical analysis. He has a gift for entertaining obiter dicta and a nice turn of phrase. His only defect as a critic is the same which is noticeable in his earlier writings on the French novel, a sudden failure of insight on account of personal prejudices against certain well established modern writers and modern points of view. A discursive quality leads also to tedium from time to time and to repetition. No student of French literature and no admirer of Stendhal could fail to find information and stimulation here, nor will he fail to receive a strong impression of Beyle's personal presence in these pages. But if he has read Stendhal's own writings he will come away with an unsatisfied feeling. The time is ripe for a brilliant biography of Stendhal. With all it has to offer, Mr. Green's is not it.

## The Road to Crime

*DESIGNS IN SCARLET.* By Courtney Ryley Cooper. Boston: Little, Brown Co. 1939. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROBERT STRUNSKY

**F**EW pictures of moral degeneration have been more graphic than this painstaking analysis by Courtney Ryley Cooper. What makes it doubly shocking is the fact that it centers around the younger generation. A year of intensive investigation revealed that crime and corruption are rampant among American youth, without regard, in many instances, to environment, geography, or education. It revealed that the trend toward criminality, far from being checked, is actually on the increase. But above all, it is the author's thesis that the moral conscience of public opinion is rapidly disintegrating.

"Designs in Scarlet" is a red signal of warning. Mr. Cooper calls upon the public conscience to get a grip on itself; to stamp out the ever-increasing breeding places of crime—the taxi-dance halls, the tourist cabins, the dine-and-dance taverns scattered along every mile of country road throughout the nation. He writes not alone from police files, but from personal experience.

For a year Mr. Cooper traveled by car across the continent vertically and horizontally, working "sixteen hours" a day. He learned how easy it is to pick up a waitress in a roadside tavern; borrow a "marihuana" cigarette from a high-school girl or boy; locate a small-town bagnio; embark upon, pursue, and conclude a career of prostitution. He discovered the ubiquitous haunts of degeneracy and the appalling degree to which it is practised. In his relentless search for case histories (he includes more than 200 in his narrative) he found a nation nowhere free of the festering sore of crime.

## T. S. Eliot's New Play

*THE FAMILY REUNION.* By T. S. Eliot. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. \$1.50.

Reviewed by SHERMAN CONRAD

**W**ITH this play it becomes substantially apparent what Eliot's theater-poetry has been coming toward and is to be. "Sweeney Agonistes" was fragmentary experiment; "The Rock" was pageant with a ready-given scenario; "Murder in the Cathedral" was a history worked into verse drama for a Church occasion. But granted their merits (particularly of the last-named), these pieces were finally only indicative, Eliot's necessary divagations

while moving toward a new form. With "The Family Reunion," a play completely "of his own devising," he appears as an accomplished poet-dramatist; the work bears the same direct, personal impact that his non-dramatic poetry does. In fact, this play carries on, in theme, from the last poem in his collected poetry, "Burnt Norton." "Murder in the Cathedral" naturally was related to that poem, but only in a sidelong way. This play is "Burnt Norton," in modern and personal terms, in the true dramatist's way, with the material personified and made explicit.

Eliot's maturest conclusion in his essays on dramatic poetry was: "If you want form you must go deeper than dramatic technique," into some sub-stratum of values, sociological, moral, or religious. The form of this play, what it is as theater-poetry, derives from just that fact: it is identical with the values it elucidates. These values have to do with the different planes of spiritual blindness and insight where human beings live. The characters are a contemporary family of the English peerage: the dowager mother, her sisters and brothers, her sons and a cousin, assembled in the ancestral house for a reunion. Most of them are unaware of anything beyond their immediate concerns; in Eliot's phrase, they see nothing. Aunt Agatha and Mary see a little; Harry, the son and heir, sees most. His vision is "of the unredeemable degradation," the corruption of life. The Eumenides which pursue him become literally apparent to him at home. Through Agatha, he learns that his Furies have a reality in the sins of his family. In his acceptance he is able to see through to a final expiation, and thus released he leaves to work out the curse. Immediate though the comparison is to the Orestes myth, it must not be overemphasized, for Eliot has discovered it all in his own terms. This world "of always more to understand" is like Henry James's; in its vision "of the horror of the night time—the nether world" it is like Djuna Barnes's; but since Harry learns "there is always more to suffer," it is finally that part of the Christian world which is Eliot's own.

The play's unique quality as theater-poetry corresponds exactly to this sliding scale of values. When the "blind" members of the family have the scene, the play is as prosaic in language, as realistic in stage-picture, as Maugham or Wilde. With Harry and Agatha the play intensifies into poetry as maturely beautiful as any Eliot has written; the stage directions suggest movement and gesture that are rightly unrealistic and choreographic.

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Woods Photo Service

Courtney Ryley Cooper

The reviewer is in no position to dispute his figures, yet cannot escape the feeling that Mr. Cooper launched upon his investigation in the spirit of a crusader—in a worthy cause, to be sure—yet eager to support his convictions with evidence. His final chapter is called "So What?" He blames the conditions he found on three factors: parents, prohibition, and the depression. He writes:

One of the great dangers of parental laxity is that it offers an alibi. It gives the youth, straining instinctively at the leash, an excuse for doing things which tempt him. It aids the crook; and any tavern keeper . . . prostitute, bartender or anyone else who profits at the possible expense of a youth's morals, is a cheap, miserable, slimy crook, whether he possesses a criminal record or not . . . It condones inefficiency in such public offices as are charged with the guarding or rehabilitation of the young. Most of all, it gives politics a chance to do as it pleases and place the blame somewhere else.