

Books of Special Interest

The Last Stuart

ALAS, QUEEN ANNE. By BEATRICE CURTIS BROWN. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1929. \$4.

Reviewed by BARTLET BREBNER

IT is hard to decide whether it was an advantage or a disadvantage to choose Anne Stuart as a subject for fictionalized biography. The poor, stupid woman was so negligible a person before she became Queen that it is difficult to dredge up out of an indifferent past much that is significant about her, although not so difficult as the author of this book would have her readers believe. Yet the consequence is that a biographer with temerity and the encouragement offered by our present appetite for pseudo-historical portraits, can present almost any picture of Anne before 1688 that he wishes. Of course the aim will be to paint an imaginary portrait not too unlike the Anne who worried William and Mary and finally ruled in their place. The fact remains, however, that even after Anne was drawn into public ken by her mere blood-right of inheritance, she proved to be so incapable and chicken-headed a nonentity that then and since she was and has been regarded as an incalculable living organism whose continued breath alone stood between a divided nation and the distresses that division breeds.

Having chosen so difficult, or so easy, a subject, Miss Brown has done a good piece of portraiture. She manages to sustain interest in the life and career of her subject quite remarkably. In fact she almost succeeds in concealing the horrid truth—namely, that Anne was "a person of no importance" except in terms of the drama of her times. She was the bridge, or perhaps better the temporal stop-gap, between the commercial and imperial England that only one of the Stuart would-be despots understood, and the even more commercial and imperial England that finally imported alien kings from Hanover as mere constitutional conveniences. Anne was thus queen at a time when all her Stuart instincts craved for a miracle to revive the divine hereditary right of kings, but when those instincts had only death and exile to feed on. Miss Brown makes this personal tragedy her

theme, but fails to bring its deep causes up into appropriate relief.

The book, then, is a quietly consistent and convincing revelation of a perpetually befuddled and thwarted woman, who happened to be a queen. The tragedy of her life was completed by the fact that she could bear children, but children who could not live. In this account of her life there are a few slight historical errors, such as a too-early introduction of the theories of the exiled Locke, but in general the imaginary history, the "decorated," and the documented, do not seriously offend. One question remains. Why, after all, should we give our time and attention to ghost-like and imaginary wraiths on the surface of the mirror of history when the active underlying forces are brought to life for us and the whole deep perspective of the times receives such effective treatment as it does in the brilliant and dramatic "England under the Stuarts" of G. M. Trevelyan? That living historian recreates Anne's life-time more fully and satisfyingly than Miss Brown and he does so with no less interest or literary charm. There are some expert historians who can write as well as interpret. Why should we not rediscover them before we offer too hearty encouragement to mere novelty? Then we might give such books as Miss Brown's the place they deserve, in this case tribute to a well-written personal history of a nonentity.

A Negro Musician

BORN TO BE. By TAYLOR GORDON. New York: Covici-Friede. 1929. \$4.

Reviewed by R. EMMET KENNEDY

IT isn't often that one finds an autobiography written with the unaffected simplicity and childlike frankness found in Taylor Gordon's "Born To Be." Seemingly aware of the fact that every experience has its place in the varied scheme of character building, he sees no reason for withholding any incident of his extraordinary life, however sordid or sensual it might appear.

Throughout the ever-changing narrative the surprised reader cannot help being impressed by the spontaneity and honesty of a mind endeavoring to reveal its homely story precisely as it came about. Unlike many

artists who have climbed to success and have made a conspicuous place for themselves in the world of music and letters, Taylor Gordon speaks of his lowly beginning and early struggles with admirable candor and unrestraint. One is conscious of his deep feeling of pride in his humble origin and African heritage when he speaks of his Zulu father, and tells of his mother who was born a slave on a Kentucky plantation, and of her brave efforts to support her children after her husband's death.

It was Taylor Gordon's unique good fortune to be a member of the only colored family living in the little Montana town where he was born. His schooldays, passed with white companions, were untroubled and happy, and his mind remaining free from all feeling of race-consciousness enabled him in after years to approach his own people and study their characteristics in a manner far different than if he had always lived among them in close intimacy.

Starting to work at an early age, he tells of his experiences as a page in the questionable house presided over by Big Maude, a blonde-haired daughter of joy who claimed relationship to English nobility. Growing tired of the hectic life and small town opportunities, he tried his luck as a chauffeur in St. Paul; then as a cook on the private car of the Ringling Brothers circus; next as a Pullman porter; then at various other things, until he finally arrived in New York City and began to consider music as his real calling. Keen observation and a humorous outlook add much to the telling of the unusual episodes.

A regrettable feature of this entertaining book is that so large a portion is devoted to amorous escapades and dallings with the "lustful heathen maid" and so little attention is given to Taylor's musical beginnings and early interest in song. Coming of a race naturally endowed with melodic sense and vocal equipment, it is surprising that his interest in the art of song was not wholly awakened until he was twenty-two years old,—if one is to rely on his own statement. He speaks with admiration of his mother's voice and the songs she sang. Were these the same moving, melancholy spirituals which he is conceded to interpret with such depth of feeling and understanding?—melodies that never had to be learned but were a part of his being from earliest childhood?

After having read the unique account and reflected on its merits as an important contribution to literature, one finds oneself asking if the patronizing foreword by Carl Van Vechten and the introduction by Muriel Draper are not unduly ecstatic. As for Covarrubias's illustrations, they reflect so strongly the elements of travesty and burlesque that they are wholly out of keeping with a story that is presented in all seriousness.

Greek Poets

HELLENISTIC POETRY. By ALFRED KÖRTE. Translated by JACOB HAMMER and MOSES HADAS. Columbia University Press. 1929. \$4.

KÖRTE'S "Hellenistische Dichtung" appeared in 1925. In the preface he says:

This little book is intended not for scholars, but for the wider circle of readers who can appreciate poetry even when it is presented in a foreign garb. . . . Every educated person is bound by a thousand ties to classical Greek poetry; everyone is more or less familiar with its outstanding works, e. g., Homer and Greek tragedy. The greater part of classical Greek poetry is available in translations, often of high excellence. But the layman's knowledge of Hellenistic poetry is practically nil; even classical scholars have too long treated that branch of poetry as a stepchild. It was due only to the papyrus discoveries of the last generation, which measurably increased our store of Hellenistic poetry, that scholarship was aroused to a more active interest in this field.

As there is no adequate history of Hellenistic literature in English, this translation will be welcomed as affording a convenient résumé of our knowledge of this period.

Professor Körte gives a critical estimate of the leading Greek poets from the death of Alexander to the reign of Augustus, with outlines of their principal works illustrated by copious extracts in verse translation. In rendering these selections the translators have availed themselves generally of existing English translations, only exceptionally giving us a new version. Professor Körte is thorough and sound in his work, but is hardly a penetrating critic. There are no brilliant flashes of inspiration such as illumine the pages of Mackail's "Latin Literature." It must be said that he works with ungrateful material; apart from Theocritus and a few writers of the Anthology, no Hellenistic poet appeals to the modern taste. As a result the book, though useful to the student of literature, is rather dull.

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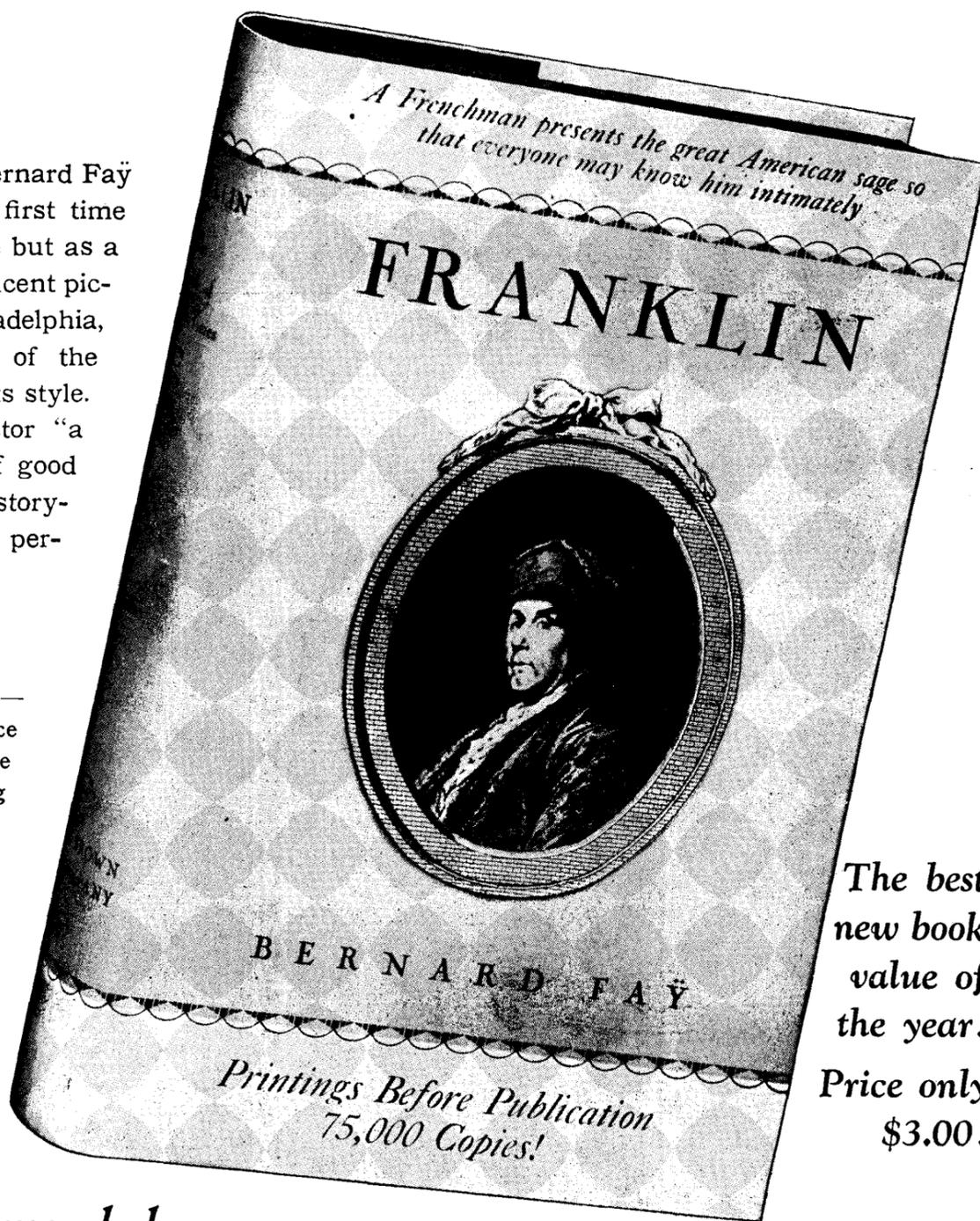
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