

## THE VICTORIAN ISAIAH

By Keith Hutchinson

Carlyle at his Zenith. (1848-1853) By David Alec Wilson. Dutton. \$5.00.

Thomas Carlyle. By Mary Agnes Hamilton. Holt. \$2.50.

CARLYLE to most of us is only a school-room figure — one of those boring Great Writers whose works we gulped hastily (preferably in pepsined form) for examination purposes and then equally hastily forgot. Yet he still has his earnest disciples, for here are two new books devoted to him. Mr. Wilson's *Carlyle at his Zenith* is Vol. IV of his massive biography and covers the years 1848 to 1853, during which Carlyle was writing "Latter Day Pamphlets" and "The Life of Sterling", and beginning work on "Frederick the Great".

Mr. Wilson is not of the modern school of biography. He does not give us a snapshot in the Strachey or Guedalla manner, but a carefully studied and laboriously achieved studio portrait. With infinite patience he has collected every biographical detail that can be found in Carlyle's letters and writings and in those of his contemporaries. From this material he has built up an almost day-to-day account of his life and as complete as possible a record of his conversations. This is a valuable piece of work and, though a little tedious for straight reading, may be recommended in small doses to those anxious to catch the authentic flavor of Carlyle's talk. As a portrait it suffers from the inevitable blurring caused by too close attention to detail. It is over-exposed. Mr. Wilson tells us all about Carlyle but if we want to know what he was like we must turn to Mrs. Hamilton.

Her book is not primarily a biography of Carlyle, but in the first two chapters she gives us a brief sketch of his life. His bleakly beautiful background among the hills of southern Scotland; his mental struggles in achieving a philosophy; his economic difficulties before "The French Revolution" made him famous; the much discussed and exaggerated question of his relations with his wife; all the essentials of his career are etched in for us with sympathy and understanding.

Then Mrs. Hamilton turns to her main task and gives a brilliantly concise account of his moral and social doctrines. Despite the current theory that Carlyle is out of date she believes that his writings have a greater import for this age than the one in which he lived. "He knew," she says, "right from wrong but it is right, not wrong, that absorbs him. All his ultimate emphasis is on how to be right. It is this positive turn that makes him uniquely significant for a generation floundering as does ours, in an uncharted sea of moral negatives."

Carlyle was a stern moralist, but by morality he did not mean a blind acceptance of the conventions. The duty of man, as he saw it, was to discover truth for himself, to believe in it fervently, to follow it consistently. This is certainly an attitude sympathetic to what we may call the higher individualism of to-day, which rejects a herd standard of values and sees morality as a strict adherence to a personal standard, individually conceived and tested.

Near as Carlyle approached to modern thought in personal ethics he was still nearer, according to Mrs. Hamilton's interpretation, to the spirit of the social doctrines of to-day. His social theories started with the assumption that every human soul had an equal value, and that every man had the right to a full realization of his potential capacities. He denied any individual right to happiness but he affirmed most strongly the right and the duty of every man to work at whatever task enabled him to serve the community best. From these basic ideas he built up an economic theory which, as Mrs. Hamilton points out, has much in common with the program of Labor movement. His was a vision of a coöperative commonwealth — a rationally organised society, because only in such a society could every individual be truly free. "Men cannot live isolated: we are all bound together for mutual good or else for mutual misery, as living nerves in the same body. No highest man can disunite himself from any lowest."

Although Mrs. Hamilton criticises Morley for his conclusion that Carlyle was prophet rather than philosopher, her book strengthens my feeling that his function was, and

is, essentially that of a prophet. He was a Victorian Isaiah who stood up in the midst of a smug, materialistic generation and with angry, sonorous, biblical prose warned men to repent or else beware of the wrath to come. He denounced "those that sit at ease in Zion" heedless of the misery and wasted human lives that accompanied their prosperity. But he spoke to them, too, of a new Jerusalem where the dignity of labor was the foundation of society and where prosperity meant more than a vulgar accumulation of possessions. And since complacency is as common to-day as in 1850, particularly in America, Mrs. Hamilton's effort to induce people to read Carlyle is one that deserves success. Her numerous quotations from his writings should dispel our adolescent notions that he is a clumsy writer or a bore. His prose, individual, musical, thundering, has a closer relation to that of, say, Mencken than to that of his contemporary Macaulay. Listen to this: "How different, above all, is that honey-mouthed, tear-stained, soup kitchen Jesus Christ of our poor shovel-hatted modern Christians from the stern visaged Christ of the gospels proclaiming aloud in the market place (with such a total contempt of the social respectabilities) 'Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!' Descend from your gigs, ye wretched scoundrels, for the hour is come". An angry, abusive, intolerant man — but never bitter, never cynical, and never sentimental.

### A NOT SO CELESTIAL CHOIR

By Emanuel Eisenberg

THE WOMEN AT POINT SUR. *By Robinson Jeffers. Boni & Liveright. \$2.50.*  
 THE WHITE ROOSTER. *By George O'Neil. Boni & Liveright. \$2.00.*  
 COPPER SUN. *By Countee Cullen. Harper & Brothers. \$2.00.*

**C**ONCERNING temperaments there is no disputing. Robinson Jeffers' particular vision instinctively directs itself to the more violent and terrible phases of life; it is impertinent and preposterous to complain that these do not comprise the whole human scene. His interests are there almost exclusively confined — probably quite unvolitionally

and undesignedly, for this is poetry of an intensity as overwhelmingly authentic and unequivocal as the break of thunder and lightning on a swollen sea. The only valid objection can be on the grounds of egoistic animosity because of acutely different world-vision. Those who are unable to see life as an incessant effort to satiate frenzied passion (lesbian, incestuous and otherwise) should steer clear of "The Women at Point Sur". They would only be intolerably oppressed, unspeakably vexed. "Lust thou art, to lust returneth", I kept muttering through the book.

The story of the Rev. Dr. Barclay's sudden abandonment of his church and family and his eventual half-insane assumption of godhood is told in the winding free-verse rhythms already familiar to many through "Roan Stallion", Jeffers' last volume of poetry. The lean athletic lines leap and pant with a throb more unnerving than even that of "The Tower Beyond Tragedy". Taut, yet savagely uncontrolled in its tautness, the bitter song of despair and unhappiness — but never melancholia and misery — is cried in an exultant chant.

Greek the poem most certainly is, with its fierce insistence on agony and ache; but there is no pity. Terror abounds. Pity has been translated into what may merely be another aspect of it (but which is unutterably different from the essential Sophoclean element): contempt, loathing, abomination for the human race. This is misanthropy equalled only by Jonathan Swift, yet entirely without the Dean's barbed humor.

"The Women at Point Sur" is an electrifying poem and an unforgettable story, surging with vigor and heat and pain; but it is only for an eclectic minority of persons.

George O'Neil has no desire to disturb his readers and asks nothing more of them than that they give ear to various elementary emotions he has been sufficiently self-conscious to realize and certain natural scenes which he considers worthy of description. There is no assault on the senses. The mind is charitably ignored. O'Neil's profoundest idea is to praise the irresponsibility of foun-