

Conflicting Methods

THE ART OF HISTORY, a Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century. By J. B. BLACK. New York: F. S. Crofts & Co. 1926. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ARTHUR W. COLTON.

THERE seem to be two insurgent movements current now among historians. One of them represented by Messrs. Beard, Turner, James Harvey Robinson, and of course many others, is perhaps in a fair way to win the field, perhaps might be called "sociological history," or perhaps that is not the proper phrase. At any rate it is insurgent against the theory that history is nothing but past politics and the doings of conspicuous persons. Professor Beard looks to economics for the sources of the Constitution as well as of the subsequent growth of democracy. The most important work on Roman history to appear within recent months is, I suppose, Professor Rostovtzeff's "Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire." To Professor Turner the great protagonists of American history are not Washington and Lincoln but the Continent and the Frontier. To Professor Robinson history, in the larger sense, is "the vague and comprehensive science of past human affairs;" but for all general histories, or for general readers (especially for school text books and popular compendiums) one must select; his quarrel with the old or conventional history is that it selects the wrong thing and leaves out the really vital and significant. It gives too much attention to military matters and the trifling details of dynasties. "Man is more than a warrior or subject or princely ruler; the state is by no means his sole interest." Moreover it is sensational; it selects only the extraordinary episodes and prodigious occurrences, the picturesque and the lurid; it omits the normal.



The other movement is a protest against the doctrine that the whole duty of the historian is to dig up facts. Without minimizing the value of original documents, or the work done by the reigning school of historical research, or subscribing altogether to such doctrines as that "history is philosophy teaching by example," this protest would maintain that—whether history can in any proper sense be called a science or not—the writing of history is an art, and the better rather than the worse for having a purpose and a point of view.

The American Historical Association some time since appointed a committee to report on the question why history, which was once almost the favorite reading of educated men, has ceased to be so; and a small volume has lately appeared entitled "the Writing of History," containing essays on the question by members of that Committee, namely, Messrs. Jusserand, Abbott, Colby, and Bassett, the burden of which is that it is because history is no longer (or seldom), but ought to be (at least some of it), written as literature. Professor Black, in the volume before us answers the question, rather more substantially, to the same general effect. Research is not the whole thing. When a historian appears who can write with as much power and form as Voltaire, Hume, Gibbon, or Macaulay, he will be read.

The query that arises here is whether these two insurgent doctrines are not likely sometime to clash with each other. Professor Robinson maintains that institutions can be made interesting, and of course they can be. To many readers they are in themselves. But one may doubt whether they are naturally, to most readers, as interesting as persons; whether Professor Robinson's proposal to discard the picturesque and prodigious in favor of the normal is not likely to make history less read rather than more; whether the man who wants history to be a literature or an art, and the man who wants it to deal with economics, mass movements, and the shift of custom—whether these two can agree with one another any better than with the predecessors against whose methods each has respectively rebelled. It is true that one school criticizes the substance of history as it has been selected, and the other the form as it has been written. Still it would be safer to hope for harmony than to prophesy it.

Professor Black reviews the work of Voltaire, Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. He notes the surprising accuracy of Voltaire, the erudition behind that flickering and flashing pen; how the bias of

Hume grew out of his philosophy; how the theory of the unchangeable uniformity of human nature makes interpretations of character inadequate, makes history a repeating decimal, and vitiates both Hume's and Voltaire's conception of the past. Robertson has

none of Voltaire's brilliance, or Hume's philosophic depth, or Gibbon's incisive learning; he is often ponderous, prolix, and sententious. His purity of diction is incontestable and its very sobriety imparts dignity—but the impression he creates depends primarily on his accuracy and general truthfulness.

Professor Black is no panegyrist of these eighteenth century historians. He is severely critical of Hume, and points to the flaws of even Gibbon's magnificent style. But he has in some sense exemplified, as well as advised, that history may be well written as well as well founded, by these studies of four men, who, writing history better than it had been written for fifteen years and better than it has usually been written since, enjoyed a kind of vogue to which modern historians are not accustomed.

Aspects of Criticism

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CRITICISM. Selected and Arranged by JAMES CLOYD BOWMAN. New York: Henry Holt & Company. 1927.

CURRENT REVIEWS. Edited by LEWIS WORTHINGTON SMITH. The same.

Reviewed by C. HARTLEY GRATTAN

PROFESSOR BOWMAN finds that there are five aspects of critical attitude about which there is considerable controversy in the United States at present. They are: "disagreement over the place of nationality and tradition," the purpose of criticism, the moral aspect of literature, the exact meaning of realism, and the matter of beauty of form. About these five points most of the essays collected in this anthology revolve. All of the essays are familiar, but it is significant that reading the volume is not a task, for all of the points really live.

Of course no one will ever formulate a universally acceptable solution to any of these problems. Indeed, one of the things that makes criticism interesting is the fact that almost any well-reasoned position is defensible. There are minds that cannot admit this patent fact, and they are the minds that ardently defend one particular position, and denigrate all others. This leads to some wonderfully interesting writing, but I doubt that it advances the writers' causes very much, or hinders the other fellow's. Criticism, perhaps fortunately, is not an exact science. I often wonder whether I am right in thinking that nine-tenths of the consuming interest the active mind has in criticism would not evaporate if literature became as exact as, say, mathematics.

To be sure the sciences are going to contribute much to the development of a relatively more scientific literary criticism, and in this movement the writings of I. A. Richards are of prime importance. As I understand it, too, one of the prime interests of M. Paul Valéry is to investigate the possibilities of a science of literature, a development of his interest in the science of mind. If criticism does become an exact science it will come through its absorption by psychology and sociology.

Even so the science of criticism would not encompass the whole field of criticism. At best it will be able only to deal with such problems as the genesis of art, the psychology of the artistic personality, the mechanism of expression, the emotional value of words and phrases (investigated in Richard's "Meaning of Meaning"), and related topics. There would still remain the whole question of one's attitude toward life. And on philosophy or *weltanschauung*, there is little prospect of universal agreement. The dominant critics of the day, for instance, are preaching the necessity for release. They want expression; they identify repression with disease. But the older critics combat that very thing and we find Irving Babbitt saying flatly that "civilization, at bottom, rests on the recognition of the fact that man shows his true liberty by resisting impulse, and not by yielding to it, that he grows in the perfection proper to his own nature not by throwing off but by taking on limitations."

This is very pleasant and reassuring for even if all the rest of the world is reduced to mechanism

by science there will still be a chance to beguile one's mind with perhaps futile and irrelevant but nevertheless entertaining speculation. Only of course it gives one cause to remember that even one's attitude will eventually be explained in terms of hormones, or unconscious mind, or something. There will be no escaping science. The world will be thoroughly comprehended—and dull. Nevertheless my allegiance to science does not waver.

But if criticism falls victim to the dead hand of exact mechanistic science there is no danger that book reviewing will. Book reviewers as creatures of whimsy and perversity will hold out longer than the critics. I mean by and large. To be sure a pioneering writer is apt to get good book reviews long before he wins to the position of having a good critical essay written about him. But book reviewers are not ordinarily very learned writers. Book reviews are pretty much trash.

If proof be needed turn to Professor Smith's "Current Reviews." It is a dismal and disappointing book. A good many important writers are represented in the volume, but still book reviewing is obviously not in the best of hands. I don't think there is one important and interesting review in the collection that was not written by a man better known in some other field. A professional book reviewer is nine times out of ten a hack.

It is just that circumstance that makes book reviewing so depressing. Comment on a book is only interesting when the man who wrote the comment is interesting, and who ever heard of an interesting hack? In these days one could write book reviews for twenty years and at the end of that time, be in a worse condition, intellectually, than when one started. And most book reviewers who remain at the occupation don't start with much.

Book reviewing is usually done hurriedly and consequently superficially. Journalists are peculiarly adapted to it. Critics are not. When the two types meet in one personality we get some interesting results. When the man behind the review is interesting, so is the review. Too often there is no man behind the review.

How to Write Short Stories

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF ANTON TCHEKHOV. Translated and edited by S. S. KOTELIANSKY and PHILIP TOMLINSON. New York: George H. Doran. 1927.

THE LETTERS OF ANTON TCHEKHOV TO OLGA L. KNIPPER. Translated from the Russian by CONSTANCE GARNETT. The same.

ANTON TCHEKHOV: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences. Translated and edited by S. S. KOTELIANSKY. The same.

Reviewed by PITIRIM A. SOROKIN
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THESE three volumes portray Chekhov as a man, as a writer, as a thinker, and as a citizen. "Ah, what a beautiful, magnificent man; modest and quite like a girl! And he walks like a girl. He is simply wonderful!" These words of Leo Tolstoy about Chekhov grasp the essential characteristics of Chekhov as a man. Honest with himself and other men; modest and bashful, like a girl; human in the best sense of the word; free from any hypocrisy, with a wonderfully balanced integrity of personality, Chekhov represents the best type of the Russian intelligentsia or the Educated Men, as he himself styles the group of the real intellectuals (see his remarkable letter "Who Are the Educated Men and What Are Their Characteristics?"). Chekhov's letters and the reminiscences of him by Tolstoy, Bunin, Kuprin, Gorky, Andreyev, Stanislavsky, and others, given in these volumes, unanimously stress these traits of Chekhov's personality and depict to us a genuine intellectual at his very best.

To the understanding of Chekhov as a writer his letters are an indispensable source. They better than any critical essay about him show the technique, the purposes, the characteristics, and the nature of his writing. Many of the letters can properly be styled the best essays in "How to Write a Short Story." Chekhov is a realist *par excellence*. Being such, he is an objectivist to such a degree that I am tempted to style him one of the most prominent representatives of a genuine behaviorism in literature and story writing. As to the technique

