

Comment by the Editor

THE LEGACY OF LITERATURE

Fortunate is the nation, the commonwealth, or the community that is of good repute in literature; for the manners and morals of a people are ever at the mercy of popular writers. The ephemeral scribbling of any presumptive dilettante in general vogue does far more to determine the reputation of a class or a community than dusty archives and dreary scholarship. To a person unfamiliar with the real activities and nature of the inhabitants of a country the accounts he reads are as gospel. It might be all very well if he perused only impartial depictions; but what can be hoped for the man who learns about Russia from Oswald Villard, who gets his impressions of France out of *Punch*, or who pictures Iowans through the myopic vision of a Carl Van Vechten. H. L. Mencken has no monopoly of prejudice.

What does it matter that false prophets seem to be prevalent? Their influence may be as transient as their popularity. But what a catastrophe it would be if some should survive, to go editioning down through the ages and screaming their egregious libels to all succeeding generations.

The only reassurance is that the literature which lives, like other forms of art, must be essentially true. Shakespeare may have misrepresented certain individuals, exaggerated racial characteristics, and distorted history; but he portrayed humanity with such insight and fidelity that he vitalized his characters. If he did Macbeth injustice, if he made Portia's Moorish suitor strikingly ineligible it was because their words and actions were true enough to be convincing. As the great English dramatist has dictated the popular conception of British kings, so Homer established the character of Grecian heroes, Dumas made the reign of Louis XIII synonymous with romance, and Tolstoi fixed opinion of Russian peasant life unalterably. Let it be repeated: fortunate are the people of good repute in literature, for in the writings of the masters they find eternal life.

If a country is jealous of its reputation, let it give more attention to its novelists, dramatists, and poets than to its historians. Fiction and verses are widely read — history is not, except in story form among school children. It is from the epics that the great achievements of the race are gleaned, the lyrics sing of the exuberance of life in other times, while the novels and dramas carry an abiding message of human hopes and passions. Histories can be revised, but the impressions derived from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are likely to be indelible.

A HAWKEYE LITERATURE

Longfellow immortalized Miles Standish, Evangeline, Paul Revere, and even a village blacksmith. But how many persons beyond the borders of Iowa have heard the story of Quimby's daughters or Bill Johnson's courtship; what poet has sung of the prairie mothers; and who can recall the midnight warning of the Moingona maiden. Though innumerable verses and dramatic recitals of Kate Shelley's exploit are alleged to have been written, considerable inquiry and diligent research have disclosed only one poem. The rest have been lost it seems.

In these traditionless times the deeds and the character of a people survive only in their literature, and woe to the Commonwealth without creative writers, for its cherished ideals will perish. Herbert Quick has recreated the character, the habits of thought, and the typical conduct of three generations of Iowans. He has also revealed the materials available for literary use. The field is rich and there should be others as faithful and gifted as he — poets and dramatists — to weave the colorful stories of prairie life into the enduring tapestry of true literature.

In an essay first published in 1809 Fisher Ames declared that of all human passions the desire to secure the respect and admiration of mankind, being the most constant, acts with the greatest force. In

ancient Greece, he wrote, "to excel in arms was the first of all claims to the popular admiration" and poetry was the best vehicle of "reaching the hearts and kindling the fervid enthusiasm of the multitude." But in America wealth appears to be the chief measure of regard and consequently is the principal object of pursuit. "Our inclinations cling to gold." Financially capable of living in comparative leisure, our people have suppressed all taste for the arts in their quest for commercial gain, so that literary "coruscations are confined, like the northern light, to the polar circle of trade and politicks, or, like a transitory meteor, blaze in a pamphlet or magazine." Forsooth, could Fisher Ames have been visioning the people of Iowa who have literary resources and plenty of wealth, but no leisure?

J. E. B.