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Last Journey

The March of Literature. From Confucius to Modern Times. By Ford Madox Ford. (Allen and Unwin. 16s.)

THIS enormous posthumous book of Ford Madox Ford is a kind of literary equivalent of Mr. Wells's *History of the World*: the work of "an old man mad about writing," it will probably offend a great many academic critics who know far more about Chinese, Hebrew, Italian or Spanish literature than Ford ever did. It cannot on those lines be reviewed at all, for you will not find a universal critic any more than you will find another writer capable of so vast a synthesis. It must be treated as a work of imagination, not as a text-book for American students, the excuse for its production. Ford wrote:

"If we succeed in turning out a work of insight and imagination and one couched in clear, uncomplicated and not harsh prose, we may make ourselves see the great stream of literature issuing from its dark and remote sources and broadening through the centuries until it comes to irrigate with its magnificent and shining waters, almost the whole of the universe of today. If we succeed in that, we too shall have produced . . . a piece of literature."

For the first third of the book he has splendidly succeeded. We are back on Ford's great trade route, but this time it is not caravans of food and spices making from the East towards his beloved Provence; it is civilisation itself swaying like a camel, harried and hunted by vandal tribes, sometimes settling down in the desert sand to die, getting up on its knees again and goaded on. . . . There is no happy ending—any more than there was to *Great Trade Route*: he sees "the doctrines of humaneness going, coiling as it were, from Sardis and Lydia to Babylon and again to Jerusalem and coming thus to us who sit here in times so infinitely more ferocious, to be to us at once a cause of shame and enlightenment."

One can only jot down notes on the progress of the immense journey: how freshly, for example, Ford writes of Xenophon in terms of soldiering, as if he were a general under whom he had served (it was a theory of Tietjens' creator that most great writers have seen military service); the breadth of his references, so that Aristophanes puts him in mind of Leon Daudet,

Pindar of a certain regimental roll call in the French Army, Athens of the atmosphere of Paris during the Press strikes; the novelty and excitement he brings to the consideration of the too considered names in Latin literature.

With the death of Virgil and the birth of Christ the magnificent poetic range, the wide comprehension of this curious Catholic, breaks abruptly off. He explains it himself, "It was as if, then, divinity passed at once from the figures of emperors and poets to light up figures vastly different—to St. Simeon on his pillar, to St. Joan on her faggots, and say to the late Mr. Spurgeon of the City Temple . . . except for Dante and of course Goethe, world poetry was at an end." So Shakespeare is oddly (and interestingly) minimised as a national dramatist, and it is in Donne alone in English literature that Ford finds the otherworldliness which is the mark for him of greatness: Villon, Dante, Isaiah, St. Augustine—he finds in them and in Donne "an overtone that can only be reached by those whose nature has been purged by the contemplation of supreme horror."

But we have reached nationalism, and with no leaders the caravan is going astray. This is the Balkanisation of literature; it is necessary to follow in too much detail too many literatures; sometimes we get bogged in a mass of minor German novelists. It is as if the attack on the caravan had at last succeeded (Ford would have said when St. Dominic destroyed the Albigenses, for whom he had a blind attachment). We get the figure of a camel-driver hunting his beasts here and there rather frantically: a good many have been lost altogether: no mention of Camoëns: only passing references to *Paradise Lost*, Baudelaire: no Proust or Rilke. Dryden gets a savage blow from the goad (nobody, it seems, can get any aesthetic pleasure from *The Hind and the Panther*, and Ford speaks of his "quite unreadable plays"). Judgements become wild, the time sequence hopelessly confused, until we stagger at last into the unsatisfactory caravanserai of the nineteenth century. Then our enjoyment of the book, which has never—even at times of extraordinary confusion—flattered, becomes rather different. Here is the Ford of the autobiographies, of the astounding anecdotes which he never pretended were strictly accurate (even the year of his own first novel is wrongly given): we hear of Stevenson seeking adventure round Seven Dials dressed as a railway ganger; Thackeray coming on board his liner at Leghorn in the early morning, striking his forehead in repentance and exclaiming, "I am a hoary lecher!"; Zola waiting for the author in Hyde Park, "seated on a park bench almost in tears over the quantity of hairpins that with the end of his cane he was counting on the ground." So this great writer takes his bow—as one of our finest prose writers, as a poet, and—it would have been incomplete else—as one of the scamps of literature.

GRAHAM GREENE.

The Soil of England

Teamsman. By Crichton Porteous. (Harrap. 10s. 6d.)
Yeoman Calling. By Christopher Turnor. (Chambers. 7s. 6d.)

IN *Farmer's Creed*, his first book, Mr. Porteous began to tell the story of his escape from the prospect of life-imprisonment in a Manchester cotton warehouse. He told there how appalling the prospect of that "lucrative appointment" seemed to him, how he threw up everything, left home, and got a job as a farm-hand in the north of England. The book had the joyful eagerness of a town-boy turned loose, for the first time, among ploughed-land and primroses, cornfields and cattle, horses and the men who worked them. It was clearly a record of escape which, for all its genuine reality, the author might never come to repeat. But now Mr. Porteous continues his story in *Teamsman*, and has managed, in my view, to write a much better book; one of the few really solid and endearing accounts of the English ploughman and his team that has ever come my way, and perhaps the only authentic account of a teamsman's life, by an outsider, in contemporary literature. In *Farmer's Creed* Mr. Porteous had worked for a Hardy-esque figure named Mr. Boone, for whom Ruskin and Swift were as important as oats and cattle, and who never took out an insurance policy on any one of his four farms, on the principle that man should trust in God and depend on himself. For about eighty pages of *Teamsman* Mr. Porteous goes on describing his life at the Boone farm; how the farm gets the new milk contract, how he first tries horse-work, ripping



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CHATTO AND WINDUS

his hands to pieces at spring-harrowing, how finally he gets restless, feels that he needs new experience, and decides to look for another farm. These pages, admirably written, show how Mr. Porteous has improved out of all recognition as a writer; his descriptions become as solid as the things they describe:

"Off the kitchen was the ancient cheese-place, like a long, narrow, whitewashed cellar, with a leaded window at the far end. Under the window were the presses, two immense squared blocks of stone, each suspended on a crude screw of wrought iron pierced through an oak beam, which was in turn supported by three uprights like a double goal. Beneath the weights was a stone slab, in which two circular hollows had been cut to take the cheeses. Each circle was crossed with tiny gutters to take the whey."

Mr. Porteous' second farmer was Mr. James Basil. He, too, after a time, begins to take on the Hardy-esque solidity: a dry-humoured man, fond of practical joking. Mr. Porteous gets his team, Bess, Bonnie, Rosie, and "from now on the horses were my sole responsibility." Gradually this team becomes a living part of the narrative: ultra-sensitive, ill-handled and obstreperous when Mr. Porteous first takes them, docile and lovable as he gains their confidence. Without sentimentality, the writing completely free of the slight touch of pomposity which marred some of the earlier pages of *Farmer's Creed*, the work of ploughing and harrowing and carting is described. There is a memorable description of Mr. Porteous and his team ploughing in mist, another of calm leisurely autumn days when he read Thoreau as he ploughed. These, and several others, put a seal of excellence on Mr. Porteous' craft as writer and ploughman, as a keen, warm observer of country life. The book is, indeed, not simply about the land, but of it; and I hope that no excursions into newspaper-work or novel-writing are going to seduce Mr. Porteous from his real job of interpreting the land and its people.

The author of *Yeoman Calling* is a practical farmer on a large scale, his book a pungent thesis on the decline and decay of agriculture in this country. The problem of an agricultural revival is discussed by Mr. Turnor from every essential point, in a style packed with fact, philosophy and cool good sense. He has sections on finance, the farm-worker, the control of production and distribution, land fertility, the various causes

of our troubles, education, systems of land tenure, and a perfectly admirable chapter on the systems of land settlement and land reclamation which have formed notable parts of both German and Italian plans for peopling and working every inch of available land. He has nothing but praise for the German system of agricultural settlement, and has even built, on his own estate, labourers' cottages on the German model: very pleasant houses, with electricity, bath, radiator, hot and cold water, for a cost of £400. He believes, rightly, that the land is the life-blood of its people; and that we in this country, with the smallest proportionate agricultural population in the world, do not realise that fact or the full significance of our disregard for it. He would like to see agricultural policy here divorced from party politics, and believes that we can and must produce another £100,000,000 worth of foodstuff from the soil. Indeed, here is an admirable, authoritative, long-needed book, which ought to be in the hands of every M.P. and every bureaucrat who can still read plain English.

H. E. BATES.

"Power Corrupts . . ."

Wall Street Under Oath. By Ferdinand Pecora. (Cresset Press. 8s. 6d.)

THE work of the Senate Commission, whose discoveries in Wall Street's practices and ethics are summarised in this book, has much in common with the labours of Hercules. One thinks, irresistibly, of the Augean Stables; hardly less so of the Hydra's innumerable heads. It is doubtful which metaphor best fits the incredible state of affairs disclosed by the investigation and here related, with restrained but effective pungency, by Judge Pecora. "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely," said Lord Acton; and here is a most outstanding verification of his words. The finance capitalists of the good old pre-Roosevelt days had the absolute power; they controlled economic empires vaster than those of most territorial potentates, often without any check whatsoever to the will of a single man. It is hardly too much to say that absolute corruption was the sequel. The list of misdemeanours is impressive. There was bribery, sometimes well disguised and sometimes quite shameless, of every conceivable public figure who might be expected to confer reciprocal benefits. There