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Donald Smalley

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back to the fundamental principles of fine craftsmanship. Today, fifty years after his death, he still lives in the work of printers who have learned to improve upon Morris's books but who found their first artistic inspiration in the products of the Kelmscott Press.



*HARDY IN AMERICA*, BY CARL J. WEBER

BY DONALD SMALLEY \*

ONE can easily divide *Hardy in America* into two parts. The first part should still be labeled *Hardy in America*; the second may well read *Weber on America*. The two books thus arrived at are about equally valuable, but they have separate uses. The first, after a thoughtful reading, will find an honored place on the shelf marked "reference"; the second will soon be dog-eared and thumb-marked and perhaps slightly scorched in the course of impassioned arguments. It may be lost by frequent lending. Otherwise it will eventually be wedged between Stuart Pratt Sherman's *On Contemporary Literature* and Bernard DeVoto's *The Literary Fallacy*.

The first ten chapters of Weber's new book carry out the promise of his preface to tell "the story of Thomas Hardy and his American readers." Throughout this section one is aware — though seldom oppressively — of the thoroughness of the author's researches and the wealth of fresh material that he has accumulated upon what, at first thought, seems to be a fairly narrow subject. Actually the subject is not narrow. Hardy has commanded a surprisingly large audience in the United States, and this account of his American readers from 1873 onward presents and interprets a highly

\* Professor Smalley, who writes this review of the first book published by the Colby College Press, is a member of the English staff at Indiana University.

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significant cross-section of America's cultural life during three-quarters of a century.

The story of Hardy's American audience is on the whole very well told. The reader may feel that some of the detail of "Hardy on the Campus" could well have been relegated to an appendix, and he will perhaps find "A Score of Noble Dames" a few too many. But the plot moves, the characters are most of them significant, and there is an amount of absorbing detective work. Hardy's experiences with American publishing make a curious, complex series of episodes, illuminating a number of notable American personalities and running the gamut from ten-cent piratings to splendid editions, from newspaper filler to the *Atlantic Monthly*. There are many strange and revealing particulars. Hardy confessed, for example, to having changed the illegitimate children originally intended for Jude and Sue into a single adopted orphan in order to satisfy the editor of *Harper's*; he may have married Thomasin and Diggory Venn for the same reason.

This first section of the book, then, is enjoyable and profitable reading in spite of a vast amount of detail. The tone is, quite properly, authoritative.

In seven of the last eight chapters of *Hardy in America* ("Hardy the Poet" is the exception), the tone is argumentative. These chapters deal with the American literary scene in our time. Hardy has been a major influence on modern writers. Theodore Dreiser placed the author from Wessex on a pinnacle with only Dostoievsky for company; Sinclair Lewis has avowed himself "a disciple." But such praise for Hardy from the camp of the naturalists does not keep Professor Weber from pronouncing the bulk of living American authors a "dreary gallery of literary talent gone to seed." There is a great difference, he argues, between "Hardy's sober portrayal of 'the grimness of the general human situation' and American novelists' warped portrayal . . . of American life." In Hardy, there is a "balancing nobility" to offset the general somberness; in Dreiser, Sin-

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clair Lewis, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and their like, there is only profound cynicism and spiritual aridity. Much modern American poetry has sunk to "rhetorical tinklings . . . of self-satisfied aesthetes." Like our modern fiction, it has scorned to supply the spiritual needs of American life. Ours is largely a literature without a message or even a pattern, and there is little health in it.

Many readers will grind their teeth and call Professor Weber a blind reactionary (or Fascist), who does not comprehend Dreiser's deep morality and Hemingway's complicated code and Dos Passos' social significance. Others will complain that Mr. Weber violates front-parlor manners in the vehemence and dead-seriousness of his argument. But many will sing a song of thanksgiving at hearing him speak out with the small but growing group of critics who insist that it is high time to reassess the values of H. L. Mencken, on which we have coasted so long and with such tragic aimlessness — critics who demand that literature not merely be, but mean.

In any event, no one can read the last chapters of *Hardy in America* without being stimulated to thought and to considerable emotion of one sort or another. These chapters are ably documented and clearly argued; and they contain more than a modicum of dynamite.



### NOTES BY THE WAY

THE Colby exhibition held a year ago on the occasion of the bicentenary of the death of Jonathan Swift was mentioned in the Spring (1946) issue of *The Library Chronicle* of the University of Texas.

President Bixler's widely discussed *Conversations with an Unrepentant Liberal* was reviewed in the *New York Times* on August 11 by a discerning critic who averred that "these conversations are far more interesting, I think, than those of Cebes and Simmias in Plato's *Phaedo*."