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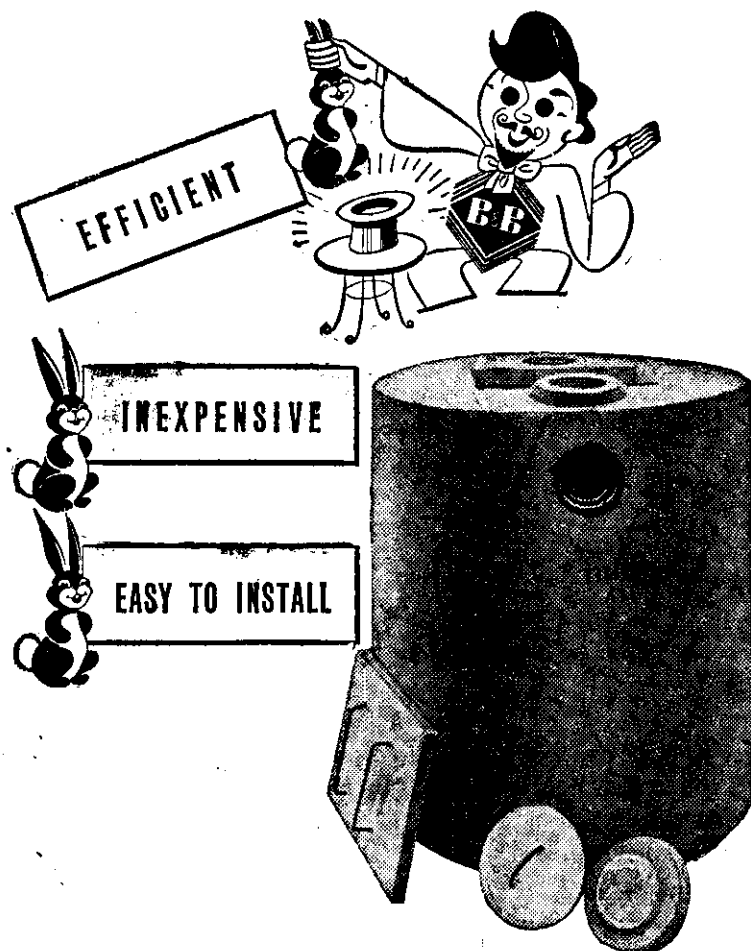
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## BOOKS

### A Master in Modesty

DAVID COX. By Trenchard Cox. Phoenix House Ltd.

THE modesty of genius is one of the perpetual surprises of biography. David Cox (1783-1859), among the most important water-colour painters of the early 19th Century English school, became a painter by accident: he was not strong enough to follow his father's trade of blacksmith and instead dabbed the colour on toys in his native Birmingham and, having some liking for paint, rose to apprenticeship to a miniaturist. The next phase in his development was to hire himself out to paint stage scenery, at 4/- a yard. Perhaps his love of the distant castle rising superby over the foreground woods and pasture-land dates back to those early tasks. Soon he was giving lessons, at a modest price, and also taking them, most fruitfully, from Varley.

Training young ladies to acquire elegance in drawing and water colour was a tiresome grind, which an early marriage prevented Cox even planning to escape from. Distasteful or not, he bent himself to this work with characteristic thoroughness, bringing out a handbook on painting landscape in water colour and selling sketches to other less gifted masters, as examples for pupils to imitate, at so much a dozen. Cox had no idea that any particular job was beneath him; nothing was hack work, even the improving of the work of amateurs who wanted their sketches published. Cox was simply a painter, a tradesman, in the same way as his father had been a blacksmith; it was due to his diligence and undistracted devotion to painting rather than to any business astuteness that he died worth £12,000, and famous. For Cox's extraordinary modesty was seen most clearly in his low prices. Most of his finished water colours he was content to sell for less than £10; £100 was the highest price he ever received, and at the height of his fame his large water colours fetched about £40. Within 10 years of his death the dealers were getting £1500 for them.

A fashion in art is to some extent created by circumstances; only in part is it due to the compelling force of an individual talent obliging the world to accept it. Thus I think there is a correspondence between the rise of the English landscape school—that delicious early 19th Century when Cotman, Bonnington, Girtin, and Cox were all alive and producing simultaneously—and the darkening shades of the industrial revolution. Just as the poets discovered their most intense delight in nature at that moment when nature was fleeing routed in headlong retreat, soon to be found uncontaminated only in a few wild moorlands and mountains, so the painters turned from portraying humanity to catching, for the last time, the vanishing beauty of the English countryside just when it was on the point of succumbing to the advancing ugliness of industrialism. Although Cox found his most satisfying subjects in remote North Wales, even his native midlands were still unviolated. His landscapes, many of which include an

architectural element as a conventional focus, take on a special poignancy from this end-of-an-epoch nostalgia. England's beauty lives in his landscapes, lives on after its own death.

Mr. Trenchard Cox gives most of his space to the biography of his namesake, but he is careful to include a critical survey of his development as an artist, and describes Cox's technique in conscientious detail. Cox was earthly matter-of-fact in his approach to technical problems. (Probably his main innovation was to discover the effects that could be obtained by using coarse paper for water colours). It was only when the critics despised the landscapes of his old age as "too rough" that Cox burst out in his own defence "they forget that these are the works of the mind" and not "portraits of places."

This book is produced with a pleasant appearance of lavishness, has four plates in colour (not quite as good as one could wish), and many reproductions in monochrome. The first of a new series on British painters, it kindles anticipation for the succeeding volumes on Blake, Constable, Gainsborough, and Turner.

No one would have been more astonished than David Cox to find himself heading such an illustrious procession. As a man Cox stands as firmly in the tradition of English puritanism as Bunyan or Defoe. When he sprained his ankle leaving a gaming house in Paris, which he had visited at a friend's insistence, he was quite sure it was a judgment on him for his wickedness in entering such a place. (On his three brief visits abroad Cox used to get over the language difficulty by drawing sketches of what he wanted to eat). Above all else, Cox was a "character," a man true to his own nature, none the less because he passed his whole life without tension, in hard work and peace of mind. At Harborne, with the front door kept permanently locked, he dabbed out his old age, retired rather than solitary, between his paintings and his garden, but three-quarters of his time went in painting. There his talent went on maturing, changing, fructifying. How could he give up, who had only just learned to do in oils nearly everything that he had been doing, all his years of mastery, in water colour?

### MOTHER OF PARLIAMENTS

WHAT PARLIAMENT IS AND DOES. By Lord Hemingford. Cambridge University Press.

THIS short and lucid account of the workings of the Parliament at Westminster shows how the machinery of legislation functions and defines the scope and powers of the two Houses in a simple, businesslike fashion which should particularly commend it to schools, but which may well appeal simultaneously to a wider public. Lord Hemingford, himself a former chairman of committees and deputy-Speaker of the Commons, is so successfully neutral, one almost entirely forgets, reading this calm summary, that Parliament is the scene of vigorously fought-out and constantly-renewed party scimmages. The only shadow of a personal judgment is his regret that Labour Party candidates