



SHAKESPEARE



SWIFT



BUNYAN



SCOTT



WORDSWORTH



GEORGE ELIOT

PICKING TO-MORROW'S CLASSICS

THE critic who said Dr. Johnson would be forgotten if it wasn't for the accident of having a brilliant biographer was not joking. Who to-day, apart from the serious student, reads *Rasselas*, *The Lives of the Poets*, or the once famous *Dictionary* itself? The great dictator of 18th Century letters—so honoured at his death that his "respectable remains" were buried in Westminster Abbey with the feet pointing towards Shakespeare's statue—is remembered not for anything he wrote, but as the man with uncouth table manners and brilliant conversational powers. He remains a classic by proxy, as it were, and it was no surprise to find Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* among the 23 British classics recently issued by the Ministry of Education for inclusion in a list of the world's 100 best books being prepared by UNESCO.

Picking the winners, even in literature, is not a new idea, but when posterity is to be the judge the contest becomes a difficult one. Who can say, for instance, which among contemporary writings might be included in a list of the world's classics published a hundred years from now? What is it that makes a classic? A study of the recent UNESCO list would make an interesting chapter for an essay on the casual and causal in literature. It is not merely that Thackeray and Trollope are ignored in favour of two women considered minor writers in their day. The whole list is full of surprises. What of Blake, Bunyan, Bacon, and Burns, to keep to the "B's for a moment? Blake could find no market for his books and was regarded as mad; Bunyan was a remorseful tinker who spent most of his life in and out of gaol; Bacon's great philosophical work, *Novum Organum*, is forgotten, while phrases from his casual jottings, the *Essays*, have almost become proverbs in the language.

And so on through the list. Defoe, a scribbling rogue of a journalist who was despised by nearly everyone who knew him, is given precedence over Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, the father and mother of the English novel. The Macaulays, Carlyles, and Ruskins are displaced by J. S. Mill's *Essay on Liberty*. The big guns of Victorian poetry, Browning and Tennyson, are omitted altogether, the poets being represented instead by Keats, killed off (according to Byron) by contemporary criticism, and Shelley, who died believing the world had forgotten his poetry. Byron himself, once the

OF making many books (as a contributor reminded us last week) there is no end, and the same might be said of the making of book lists. But it is satisfying to record our votes, even on a literary ticket, and it can also be good for us if we think hard enough before voting. The opinions printed below are intended to be footnotes to the British Ministry of Education's list of English classics (printed on page 7). Readers may find them interesting in themselves, and useful as a framework for discussion.

toast of London and a symbol of freedom to all Europe, is not considered worthy of inclusion.

What will be time's verdict on our own age? Will Bernard Shaw be remembered for his postcards, the solemn ruminations of Henry James be neglected in favour of *Treasure Island* and *Mr. Standfast*, or Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* be read while we consign the trinity of Galsworthy, Wells, and Bennett to the dust? It isn't likely, perhaps, but on the evidence, quite possible. Who can predict whether anyone in future years will read James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, or any other of the recognised contemporary masters? Of course, no-one can; but it is a provocative subject for speculation, and one that is not without some profit for the speculator. Here are some opinions to argue about:

EBB AND FLOW

(F. J. Foot, *Barrister and Solicitor, of Wellington*)

TO boldly express opinions on a matter of this sort qualifies one as a coconut shy for readers of *The Listener*, either now or 100 years hence. So let me protect my head forthwith by proclaiming that my judgments hold good for myself. They are to be imposed upon nobody and I am to have leave to reverse myself in a year or two hence if so minded, and if still here.

Rightly or wrongly, we regard as classics those works which entertain, surprise and delight us, and which entertained, surprised and delighted our grandparents, and their grandparents. (Classics have an ebb and flow like tides and I skip generations to demonstrate the syncope effect they exhibit.) Trollope was neglected for more than one generation; though *Barchester Towers* is one of our best novels.

The theme of course need not be light and the entertainment may be incidental to a didactic purpose (Ruskin), or advancement of a social or other reform (Dickens), to biography (Trevelyan's *Early History of Charles James Fox*), to autobiography (Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua*), or nothing but a story or romance (Trollope).

The field need not be wide and sometimes is extremely restricted (Jane Austen; Surtees). Generally we have to leave memoirs to the French.

All this is as of course and is description rather than definition and pretty negative at that, and by no means exhaustive. There is the question of verse. What happened in your columns recently to a certain "Ode" whose author adopted a certain poetic license, inclines me to leave this question to others.

Attempting some rough classification, however, and keeping mostly to the very moderns, begging pardon for omissions, and apologising for all these particples, I shall vote for E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* (didactic?), George Santayana's *The Last Puritan* (philosophic novel), L. M. Nesbitt's *Gold Fever* (social reform), Jean Burton's *Sir Richard Burton's Wife* (biography), Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (satire), Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (psychological novel), Geoffrey Household's *The Salvation of Pisco Gabar* (long short story), Agnes Repplier's *The Sin* (short short story).

And now here's an extraordinary thing which I didn't intend. The list includes two Americans (one of French descent), a Canadian, a Spaniard, three Englishmen, and Nesbitt, who was part Italian, part French and part Scottish. A fairly world-wide medium of expression of thought for our English tongue. As Falstaff said to the Chief Justice, "It was always yet the trick of our English nation, if they have a good thing, to make it too common."

SHIRT ON CHURCHILL

(Denise Dettmann, Senior Lecturer in Classics, Victoria University College)

IF I were forced to bet on just one book in the English language as certain to be read in 100 years' time I would put my shirt on Winston Churchill's memoirs. It is not in every country or in every century that you get a first-flight statesman who is also a master of presentation and style. Churchill will be a classic for the same reasons that Thucydides and Julius Caesar are classics.

Q: Which brings us to the chief problem in this quest—what makes them classics?

D.D.: Oh, readability—which is ultimately the same thing as survival value. We read a book either for content or style—Aristotle's *Matter and Form*. And I can't think of any book recognised to-day as a classic which has not been distinguished on both counts. We must be interested in what the author says and in how he says it; as style usually wears better than subject, it follows that the subject must be one with universal and lasting interest.

Q: And have you a book to fit this requirement?

D.D.: Perhaps Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* fits. The reaction against Hemingway has already begun, among the professional critics chiefly; but I expect him to go on being read in spite of it. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has a universal theme—the conflict between the claims of a man's personal life and the cause to which he is devoted.

Miss Dettmann said she thought this age would come to be remembered as one of minor classics, books of enduring charm rather than earth-shaking emotional or intellectual impact; she would look forward to re-reading, if reincarnation happened to give her the chance, C. S. Forester, as a present-day R.L.S., Evelyn Waugh (for the extraordinary blend of atomic tragedy and sheer farce), Angela Thirkell (for her picture of an England that is passing, drawn with just that touch of exaggeration by which Art improves upon Nature), Joyce Cary's *Mr. Johnson*, and the Father Brown stories.

Q: No Shaw?

D.D.: Oh, I regard Shaw as already a classic and therefore as good as dead. He is in the unusual position of having lived to enjoy his own immortality, as Pliny said of Verginius Rufus.

Q: And no poetry?

D.D.: No poetry. The last true English poet for me was James Elroy Flecker. Unfashionable, I know, but there it is.

SIXTH SENSE

(Roy Parsons, bookseller, of Wellington)

FIRST of all I don't want to set myself up as an expert. I have a superficial knowledge of contemporary literature through reading current critical writing about books and authors. For instance, I haven't read T. S. Eliot, yet I know he has a certain quality and stature, he is recognised by the other poets, influences his contemporaries, and so on; he also outsells any other poet and has done for some time,

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