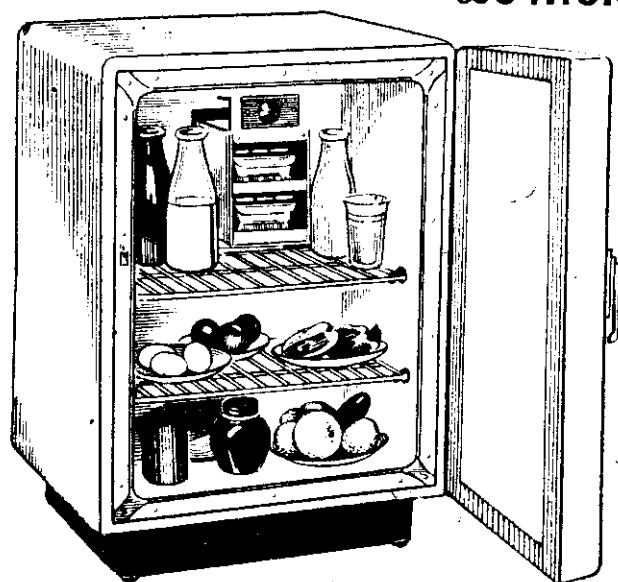


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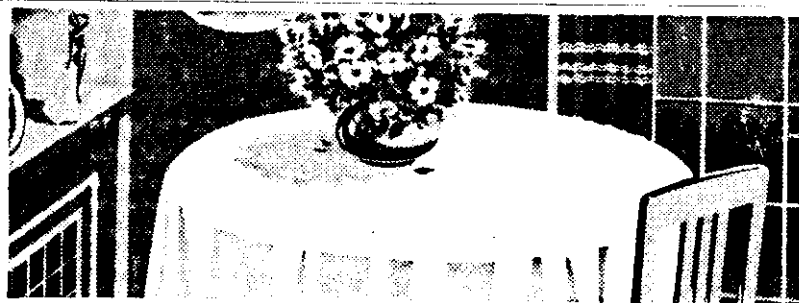
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BOOKS

"Max" at the Theatre

AROUND THEATRES. by Max Beerbohm; Rupert Hart Davies.
English price, 30s.

(Reviewed by A.M.)

MANY years ago two stage-struck New Zealand schoolboys (one a future professor of English) discovered Bernard Shaw as dramatic critic of the *Saturday Review*. They were astonished to find Shaw's successor, one Max Beerbohm, introducing himself with the avowal that he was not fond of the theatre. They read no more. Today he is Sir Max Beerbohm, an octogenarian, "the incomparable Max," whose fame as essayist, cartoonist and broadcaster has for many obscured the fact that he was ever a dramatic critic. A selection of his dramatic criticisms, included in a limited edition of his works published in 1924, has now been issued for the public, and it opens with the I-do-it-though-I-love-it-not warning of 1898.

Fortunately, it did not turn out so badly, so that one suspects a gesture of youthful bravado. The theatre never gripped young Beerbohm by the throat as it does the true addict; but he had some love of it, and an acute understanding of play-writing and acting. True, there is a touch here and there of the cocksure and superior young man. Highly enthusiastic about *Cyrano de Bergerac* in the original French, he was scornful of it in translation, but he has lived to see the English-speaking world (myself included) get a great kick out of an American screen version, "Had Mr. Kipling been born a Frenchman"—that is, in a nation of real literary taste—"his talent would have found no recognition at all." Maybe, but Sir Max must know that French critics have ranked Kipling as a great writer. And how delightfully characteristic of his class was his remark that Americans had "no history worth mentioning." However, I can see "Max" throwing up his hands in mock horror: "My dear fellow, I was young enough then to know everything!" Indeed, he said so in effect in 1924, and the words are here.

There is a large essay element in the criticisms. With him, compulsion to tell readers what a play was about was less than with the daily critic, and he was favoured with more time and space. That being so, it is a pity he glibed at the style of critics who (I have been one myself) had to struggle against these foes. There is plenty of wit and learning and wisdom in these 580 pages, and much hard hitting for

better drama and acting. The period, 1898 to 1910, must be noted, for, if we exclude Robertson, this was roughly the second decade of the British renaissance, after the dreary depths of fustian and adaptation. The fight was on, with gloves off, for fidelity to life. Shaw was coming into his own, and Beerbohm handsomely recanted an opinion that his plays were not suited to the theatre. That Pinero was a leader among reforming writers, did not prevent Beerbohm from analysing his dialogue mercilessly. *The Admirable Crichton*, *The Voyage Inheritance*, and *Justice* illustrated new approaches in subject and technique. Beerbohm expressed himself with complete candour. If he thought a play deplorable or disgusting, he said so. His final word on *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* was that he supposed blasphemy paid.

Among the procession of stage figures here are Irving, Bernhardt, Coquelin and Duse, and one of the most sympathetic items is an obituary tribute to Dan Leno. I don't think this will add to "Max's" very high reputation, but it is a valuable survey of the time. The historian of the theatre will be glad to put it beside the collections of criticisms by Shaw, Agate and Desmond MacCarthy.

GOVERNING THE PEOPLE

PARLIAMENT: A SURVEY, edited by Lord Campbell; Allen and Unwin. English price, 22s. 6d.

THIS is the result of a study of parliamentary government in Britain by a group of experts who can write as well as think. The authors include D. W. Brogan, Sir Cecil Carr, Sir Arthur Salter, Ivor Thomas and G. M. Young; the subjects discussed cover Cabinet and Parliament, Parliament in Relation to the Civil Service, the Organisation of British Parties, the Courts and the Constitution, Delegated Legislation, and Parliamentary Control over the Nationalised Undertakings.

There is no cant and very little self-delusion in this book. It is set down, for example, that during the 19th century the House of Commons remained the preserve of the governing classes and the "function of the lower orders was limited to giving the system a popular imprimatur by helping to choose which of two aristocratic parties should hold office"; that the "averagedly intelligent observer may be excused for thinking that the Labour Party has taken the place of the Liberals..."; that Palmerston "accepted on an average twelve defeats a session with, possibly, Christian, but, certainly, no other kind of resignation"; that in New Zealand and Australia "parliamentary debate is even more party-bound than it is here"; and "finally, after weeks or months of labour the Bill emerges from the little working gang of civil servants... all the departments concerned



Young Max Beerbohm
(A self-portrait)

"CALL BACK YESTERDAY," by Dr. Hugh Dalton (below) is to be discussed by Professor W. P. Morrell in ZB Book Review on Sunday, October 4. Three other recent additions to the non-fiction list are also to be reviewed in the same session: "Prescription for Rebellion," by Dr. Robert Lindner (reviewer, Dr. G. Blake Palmer); "Straight and Crooked Thinking," by Robert Thoutless (Rev. P. O. C. Edwards); and "Sword and Swastika," by Telford Taylor (Major-General L. M. Inglis).

