

The Case of Henry James

HENRY JAMES. THE UNTRIED YEARS
1843-1870. by Leon Edel; Rupert Hart-
Davis. English price, 25/-

(Reviewed by P.J.W.)

WHILE hundreds of American families in covered wagons were moving inland on the great westward migration of the 1850's, Henry James Jr. and his family were crossing France and Switzerland in a travelling carriage. In this first volume of what should be the standard biography of the first of the modern novelists, as Gertrude Stein once called him, Leon Edel shows how his later expatriation was the direct and logical outcome of his estrangement from America as a child. The international scene he wrote about was the "land" of his particular breeding.

Mr. Edel is an ideal biographer. He has worked on the immense mass of James material for 20 years, and his book is a model of condensation, of selection of key points in the evidence, presented without undue psychological speculation. The important role given in James's fiction to the acute and

hypersensitive observer reflected his own position in life, his buried sense of his subordinate position alike to father and brother—the Jacob and Esau theme. He wanted to equal his brilliant brother William, but the man who was to become the leading philosopher of his place and time seemed to outshine the timid second son at home. Books, the imagination, writing, held an escape from "the frustrations of his juniorhood." Action was translated into art. He could observe, and nourished in silence his "point of view." He was drawn by his early association to the French novelists: the question of form obsessed him, and his first published writing was a youthful expression of his idea of the novel as a work of art.

Mr. Edel speaks authoritatively for the first time on the great riddle of Henry James's life. What was the "obscure hurt" he suffered in "the same dark hour" as the outbreak of the Civil War, while manning the pumps to put out a fire in Newport? His elaborate euphemisms, the use of the words *intimate*, *odious*, *horrid*, *catastrophe* in his own accounts of the affair led his readers to suspect the worst, Mr. Edel says. "However much different men might



HENRY JAMES
No covered wagon traveller

have different answers, in the case of Henry James critics tended to see a relationship between the accident and his celibacy, his apparent avoidance of involvements with women and the absence of overt sexuality in his work." He suggests that James magnified the injury to minimise his failure to go to the war like other young men, that he had merely strained his back, and that the

real cause of these aspects of his life and writings was psychological rather than physical.

The book deals with the launching of James's career in Boston, his friendships with Sargy Perry, John la Farge (who introduced him to Balzac and Merimee), Charles Eliot Norton and William Dean Howells. The main factors which formed his personality are set down conclusively. The "vampire theme" which recurs in many of the novels is seen as the product of his relationship with his mother, his observations of his mother's relationship with his father, and his own friendship with Minny Temple, the cousin who died early and whom he saw as "a young and shining apparition," a "disengaged and dancing flame of thought." She was strongly drawn to Henry, but was he in love with her? Mr. Edel thinks not; he was content to worship from afar. He was always afraid of engaging his affections too deeply. Love for him was not only a deterrent to the full life but a threat to life itself. He was a shy, dedicated young man who asked only to be "just literary," and through pursuing his undeviating path he became one of literature's great masters.

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