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CHAT OF LITERARY THINGS

Colonial Renaissance in American Literature.

FIELD WELL CULTIVATED

Women First to Seize Upon Its Possibilities—Mrs. Watson's "Dorothy and the Puritan."

TO THOSE whose pleasure it is to study the currents of thought and the direction of things, there is appreciable a new and well-defined tendency in book production. Truly enough the straws on the surface have indicated the sequence; but only recently, say within the past seven or eight months, has the new course been clear to many. It may countenly for a passing inclination, but more likely it will expand in development, for it is a new lead for our writers. It is the only individualized bent since romance superseded the problematical and sociological novel. In its narrative branch it is a direct outgrowth of the romantic class. In a word, it is a colonial and revolutionary renaissance.

This new field is being diligently developed by all hands. It is a good and fertile field, and as is characteristic of contemporary writers, all are hastening to the last stone turned. If a prophecy were ventured it might be said that such assiduous working as is now being given the new field will either exhaust it or nauseate the market of the unvarying similitude. The picturesque period of our history is a delightful prospect for the romancer. At this time it is sufficiently remote to have assumed the mystic haze that hangs over the land where swords clash and blood flows, and with the removal of the error of proximity, which has so long crippled us with the idea that nothing is worth while except that which must be reached for from a distance, we now recognize the fine features of a period rich in color, incident, grace, virility and inspiration.

But the possibilities of the colonial and revolutionary era did not discover themselves to the writers directly. No burst of inspiration opened the eye, no inexplicable force sped the pen. Things worked their way out naturally, and the natural way leads under the arch mercenary. Causes which lead to great effects are sometimes so insignificant as to render almost ridiculous their association with the inordinate sequence. The renaissance has devoted itself to works on real and actual colonial characters, places, incidents, persons, manners and to colonial fiction. The former were first in the field. When art critics repudiated the modern, the regular and the conventional in the niches of these gods were set the antique. A nick, a crack, a rip, a stain, a frayed edge, were marks of the exquisite. At once old china, old furniture, old pictures, began to take their place in the homes.

The modistes followed suit and decreed crinoline and flounces and all that our ancestors wore, and the draper revived the Dolly Varden pattern with the new stamp of Dresden. Forthwith all things colonial were the fad. The collectors began their catalogues, the experts wrote their monographs, the magazines recognized the timeliness of colonial articles, and the colonial renaissance was fairly on. But what has given it more than anything else the stamp of permanency is the large number of patriotic societies with their vast membership, all rummaging through the colonial garrets for ancestors and ghosts and skeletons of ancestors. They developed individual magazines and published collected addresses and essays and historical studies. To that the independent publishers and recognized writers are now adding works of exceptional interest, which may be said to seal the individuality and substantiality of the renaissance.

IN THIS new direction of energies, it is singular that the women were first to seize upon its possibilities, and not until last year did a man with any degree of efficiency or success take part in the renaissance. One of the first women to give colonial atmosphere to her books was Augusta Campbell Watson. So early as 1892 she wrote her successful, "The Old Harbor Town." The place which gives its name to the story is New London, Conn., as it was in 1774. The heroine, Letty Chester, is a typical girl of the colonies, in her white frock, only ankle long, with bare neck, and fair, mit-screened arms, and demure, downcast eyes, shaded under the immense bonnet and nodding ostrich plumes. She dances the minuet, she plays upon the harp, she is betrothed to Lord Percy Seldon, of his majesty's army, but she loves Robert Averill, a colonist. Thus is it the old story, then as now, and the heart triumphed as right did after the storms of bitter war. Mrs. Watson's second novel was "Dorothy, the Puritan. The Story of a Strange Delusion."

In this she has not only taken a firmer hold on the possibilities of the time, but she has commanded her own resources better. It reveals a more accomplished writer than the earlier book. The story is keyed in admirable harmony with the rigidity of the Puritan character, their superstitions and unrelenting intolerance It is not a Revolutionary story, but reaches back into the earlier and more precisely colonial days. Cotton Mather himself is one of the conspicuous characters. Dorothy fell under the bigoted hate of those about her and was condemned to death as a witch. The procession to Gallows Hill and how Dorothy was rescued from the hemp are told with graphic fidelity and dramatic power. E. P. Dutton, as the publisher of these stories, should be credited as a pioneer in the new development.

IN THE chronology of the colonial fiction at this point steps in Miss Anna Robeson Brown, a young woman not yet twenty-three years of age. She is a daughter of a distinguished orator of Philadelphia, and the great-niece of Charles Brockden Brown, who holds so important a place in the earlier history of American literature. For several years Miss Brown has contributed to St. Nicholas and other magazines, but her first long story was not published until 1895. It has been followed by another novel, and by the charming historical tale, "Sir Mark," a romance of the Old World and the New, which pictures life in the first capital—Philadelphia. The story opens with the adventures of the son of an old cavalier in England, and later it exhibits the social life and the political intrigues of the first capital. "Sir Mark" is one of the most interesting of the colonial romances, being not only Miss Brown's best book, but one of the best of the class to which it belongs.

THE next woman to present to readers of today some allegoric fiction of social and domestic life during Colonial and Revolutionary days, was Anne Hollingsworth Wharton. She is a Pennsylvania woman. Drawn into the new current, she was carried along with its varying caprices. At first she wrote severely historical papers, and then specific subjects claimed her efforts. Always a voracious student, she soon had the atmosphere and temperament colonial so well assimilated that she attempted two works, which justified her endeavor, for they stand out conspicuously in this literature as picturesque as well as accurate and they, in their way, are delightful guide books to the people and places of the times. She was encouraged by the Lippincotts, and they have, through her, become in a way intimately identified with the publication of colonial literature. Miss Wharton's first book was "Through Colonial Doorways." This volume contains seven papers, which were first published in the periodicals.

The seven are, the title chapter; one on the famous Meschianza which was held at the house of one of the family to which she belongs; New York balls and receptions before the war of the Revolution; the American Philosophical Society, one of the most influential factors in the mental growth of the times; the Wistar parties, the direct outgrowth of the society; A Bundle of Old Love Letters, and the Philadelphia Dancing Assemblies, which shocked the Quakers, but delighted the worldlings who gave themselves to the fascinating dissipations. Seven other chapters, printed for the first time, were published a year after under the title of "Colonial Days and Dames." Here we may read of the colonial days, of the women of the early settlement, of certain of the early poetesses of colonial days, of certain old landmarks, of the weddings and merry-makings and the legend and romance of those days. Miss Wharton not only labors with intelligence and enthusiasm, but her results are singularly pleasing and delightful. She brings the old life nearer to the present generation with fidelity and grace, managing her lights and effects for most pleasing results.

AND still the ladies lead. We give "place aux dames," not by courtesy alone, by right, for no men had yet entered the colonial lists two years ago when Alice Morse Earle edited the diary of Anna Greene Winslow. Mistress Winslow was a real person. She came to Boston at ten years of age, in 1770, from Nova Scotia, to be "finished" at the Boston schools. She wrote, with evident eagerness and loving care, for the edification of her parents and her own practice in penmanship, this interesting and quaint diary, which forms a most sprightly record, not only of the life of a young girl at that time, but of the prim and narrow round of daily occurrences in provincial Boston. It has a positive value as an historical picture of the domestic life of that day; a value of which the little girl who wrote it, or her kinsfolk who affectionately preserved it to our own day, never could have dreamed.

The interest which attaches to the book is singularly unique. The author made her second exclusive excursion into this work the next year, when she wrote "Colonial Dames and Good Wives." This is not less delightful, but she is more discursive and more herself. It is a vivid picture woven of diaries, journals, lore, hearsay and written history of life in and about all the original colonies. Not the least sprightly portion of the whole book is the very beginning, in which is described the populating with women. There is an interesting chapter on the "Daughters of Liberty," whom the author notes, in distinction to the claims of other recent societies, as the first patriotic society of women in America. The provident wives who helped their husbands in the affairs of providing and the very different "double-tongued and naughty women" are told of, with many interesting and amusing anecdotes. Such books as these are contributions of inestimable value to the national history of sociology. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. were her Maecenas, and the binding, in imitation of old-fashioned embroidery, is refreshingly antique.

THUS the women showed the way and discovered to their readers the picturesqueness and romance of the Colonial and Revolutionary period. These books were all written in the formulative period of three, four and five years ago. At the same time Stanley Weyman and Anthony Hope were rejuvenating romantic fiction. It had appeared that the field was well covered, and each went into the land of Nowhere to call together their characters. An American novelist recognized the romantic value of our Revolutionary period and the possibly commercial value of a novel of this character with interest well stimulated. So Mr. Chauncey C. Hotchkiss wrote "In Defiance of the King," the Appletons published it, and results have justified both parties to the experiment. The book achieved widespread popularity. It was almost a pioneer, but the author handled his theme securely.

This interesting writer is a man in the prime of life, whose early years were marked by the conflict waged betwixt a commercial career, in which he was not successful, and leanings toward literature and art, in which he has taken a decided step toward success in his remarkable first novel. He was for two years temporarily editor of a paper, but outside of this experience he had written little for publication until he devoted himself to the present story. He has had no practical literary training, but has always been a devoted student of literature, having written much for his own gratification, but not until recently with a view to publication. Mr. Hotchkiss is at present a surgical photographer in the New York and Roosevelt Hospitals, but if he succeeds in fulfilling the promise shown in his first story, it is probable that he will devote himself altogether to literature. "In Defiance of the King" opens on the night before the battle of Lexington. It is told by one of the students living "over in Cambridge," and is every line as vivacious as the most blase could desire. It closes with the battle of Groton Heights. If not the identical American revolutionary romance, it is a type of what that will be.

IN spite of the biographical suggestion in its name Charles Carleton Coffin's "Daughters of the Revolution" is a historical romance. In fact, it is the only conspicuous novel of this period which has its footing on actual fact and real people. Mr. Coffin says that he felt that while many volumes had been written setting forth the heroism of the fathers of the Revolution, the mothers and daughters had been neglected. It is, then, the gallant purpose of his story to portray in some degree their influence in the struggle of the colonies to attain their independence. He is a believer in the historical romance, and cites in evidence how much more firmly have the manners, people, and facts of their period been impressed through "Waverly," "Ivanhoe," and "Uncle Tom's Cabin" than in dry history. The story opens in the fall of 1769. The stamp act has been repealed, and the irritation produced by that act has been allayed. It was a period of quiet and rest.

The colonists still regard themselves as Englishmen and loyal to the crown. Information came that his majesty, George III, was determined to maintain his right to tax the colonies, by imposing an export on tea, to be paid by the exporter, who, in turn, would charge it to the consumer. The first resistance to that claim was the agreement of all but six of the merchants of Boston not to import tea from England, and the agreement of their wives and daughters not to drink tea so imported. It was a resistance which had its outcome in the famous Boston "Tea Party." The determination of the mothers and daughters to abstain from its use brought about a change in social life, and was influential in awakening a public sentiment which had its legitimate outcome in the events of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. And through the adventures of all these vivid days Mr. Coffin leads his reader into the very heart of history. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. are his publishers, and every available illustration seems to have been seized upon to illuminate the text.

THE lastest story with its foundations in the colonial period is from the Harper press. It is a book which will appeal more directly to boys, "For King or Country," and is written by James Barnes. Mr. Barnes should have it in his blood to write a thrilling patriotic story. He was born in the navy yard at Annapolis, and is a son of Lieut. Commander Barnes, U. S. N. On his mother's side his great-grandfather was Commodore Fainbridge, the hero of the Constitution and Java fight and nearly all his ancestors on both sides were in the army or navy. He is a Princeton man.

The two principal characters of the present story are twin brothers, lads of sixteen; and one enlists for his country, while the other remains loyal to the king. Their home is on Staten Island, but the scenes of most of their adventures are cast in New York and the vicinity, and the incidents of the tale are founded upon historical events which transpired about the city during the early part of the war for independence. Love does not play any part in the story. The denouement is the capture of the royalist brother by the patriot and the oath of allegiance to their country. It were a flint heart and callous youth who could resist the many adventurous illustrations.

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