

BOOKS

The Book of the Day
by Laurence StallingsHow 'Reason and Nature' Provokes a
Reviewer's Confession.

Reviewers may be by nature honest; but some books lend themselves to the graces of a review, and some do not. The most widely read and deeply reviewed book in the list of best sellers, for that reason, is rarely a work to which reviewers have devoted their best hours. A reader may have been spending four months upon Morris R. Cohen's "Reason and Nature" with full recognition that it must have been one of the truly fine books of 1931. Yet the only worthwhile sort of review it could command would be the publication of a letter from a biochemist to a biologist, thanking him for the gift of such a volume.

Mr. Cohen is not concerned with making a reviewer's path to be strewn with primroses, though the book is cogent, reflective, yet clear. It is studiously devoted to setting down a method of thinking along lines of a rational scientific procedure. Unquestionably "Reason and Nature" charts the course that thought will plot often in our time; it apprehends methods abhorring since Galileo, and which have become so acceptable that, by the middle of this century, a philosopher who disregards the tenets of scientific rationalism will hardly be de rigueur at the meetings of his society. (It may be, of course, that he will be a greater man than any other there.)

It would seem certain that "Reason and Nature" contains within its admirably reasoned and profound pages the basis of what must be accepted "in the competition of the market" as the proper way in which to search for truth. Yet it defies reviewing in a general sense and is one of the profound books which will not be met with on any best selling list; it will probably be found there in work reduced to creaking scale by some popularizer when, "fished up," it publishes a brighter blue, perhaps, the public begins to inquire as to the nature of classic, scientific rationalism.

We confess it to be our busman's holiday. Reading it in secret, with no thought of reviewing it in itself it is a constructive review of man's own processes which distinguish him from other beasts—we regret having written this much about it.

Reviewers, those who go from day to day, have little privacy of mind. Few books can escape the mill; for the grist must keep coming. One of our favorites was a work on economics which we read in hospital. It is no exaggeration to say that the book let us to two years of night sessions in economics at Georgetown University in the School of Foreign Service.

That book was "The Economic Consequences of the Peace" by John Maynard Keynes. Certain men grievously situated at that time believed, with Mr. Keynes, that Versailles was all the bunk; and of it every settlement, every geographical division, every economic readjustment. We sat around to await the crash. Friends grew wealthy not awaiting it. And now, between the explosion and counting the dead, Mr. Keynes does another book and is reproached for an "I told you so" attitude. Since that first book of his came from Harcourt-Brace he has written steadily of such things as treaty revision, currency reform, and the Russian economic phenomenon. It is hardly just to say that his new book is an "I told you so." But it would be fair to call it "I keep on telling you."

It is difficult for a reviewer not to succumb to the errors of the public which he feeds. For consistent brilliancy Mr. Keynes has been by all odds the best of our prophets in the world of revision. But what will it avail a reviewer, of no specialized knowledge, to do such a thing into the public ear? It would mean to challenge almost every other economist to do so. The best review list, when things such as Keynes has unerringly predicted have come true, is filled with gibes about "Oh yeah" from men who prove their own faulty rather than that of the stock racketeers who were uttering them. We were in despair until that market crash came. We had remained out of speculation until we were green with envy of our millionaire friends, and all because reading "The Economic Consequences of the Peace," we followed Keynes and believed him right and that the whole thing was a house of cards. But we have never, that we recall, mentioned Keynes before in a review.

When we find a book such as "Reason and Nature," and we believe in our mind and our heart that here is a book as reasoned, as serviceable to us as Keynes has always been, we are at loss to review it. We would need a sledge hammer, and to go about socking people with it. When we think of Keynes with his arrogance in 1919, telling the world what the rogues would not have it believe, somehow we connect him with the

Cohen book on how to think a thing through and hold to it. Yet to say "Keynes" just now finds your friends saying, "Oh, yes, now he has his innings," as if, because a man pronounced the truth, which came to pass, he was having some sort of personal victory.

A reviewer can hardly have privacy of opinion as regards the imaginative works, such as fiction and poetry, and belles lettres in limited editions. These things, at his hand, must immediately go into the mill. But books such as "Reason and Nature" are not to be reviewed; unless, of course, one wishes to bore the reader with a long list of Mr. Cohen's terms—with a judicious and pious exception to an occasional point or two—and with a sham exhibition of the reviewer's own superior knowledge in such a field.

Good as some of the book reviews in such journals as the Nation and



Mrs. Mary Roberts Rinehart, author of "Miss Pinkerton" (a mystery story, to be published February 11 by Farrar & Rinehart, \$2). Buying a mystery story at a bookstore. (Associated Press Photo.)

the New Republic are, a good half of the reviews are in such vein; by amateurs, by ruddy old boys who have a few corners in such a subject while at college, and by gentlemen professing to decipher with pleasure Bertrand Russell's dispute with Einstein and his variation from de Sitter. A general reviewer nowadays is licked before he starts when he attempts to gain the work of any great specialist in his field; he is fatuous when he tries to praise it intelligently. How can he do either? It has been many decades since a man might sum up within him all the erudition in the time of Voltaire; the greatest reviewer in history, it was possible. One had read Plato and that crowd; had punished Descartes and his crush; was leaning to Newton, &c.; was going to tear into everything.

It is our greatest pleasure to spend a lot of time in the company of an old gentleman who got his biology at the Zoological Institute at Berlin, and who listened to Huxley at Kensington. One finds him at 76 for ever putting into his little red notebook works which he must have immediately to keep in step with the general knowledge advanced in his field. Yet, at nights now, when it is chill, he likes best to put his microscope under the lamp nearest the fire; for he still has hopes of seeing an amoeba divide. In fifty years it has not been within his fortune, and so the hay emulsions are all around swarming with infusoria.

We think of this simplicity in one field of knowledge, and know that not only we, as a reviewer, but all general reviewers everywhere are falling terribly when they set themselves up to review a work calling for a passionate, specialized endeavor in a field remote from easy apprehension. We can only say that we believe in Morris R. Cohen's "Reason and Nature"—and that we are not competent to believe—and let it go at that.

Radio Talks on Music

SYMPHONIC BROADCASTS. By Olin Downes. Dial Press. \$2.50.

The music editor of the New York Times has here collected and amplified the series of radio broadcasts he gave in 1930-31 as interpreter of the works performed under Toscanini's direction by the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, in addition to two programs rendered by members of the Curtis Institute of Music. There are 150 standard productions of orchestral repertoires dealt with by Mr. Downes in a simplified fashion which should not fail to reward devotees of music whose technical understanding of the art may need the enlightenment that he, in all essentials, adequately supplies.

The Columbia University Press has just issued No. 354 of its studies in history, economics and public law, Edward R. Hardy's "The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt."

The Ginned Parade

AFTERNOON MEN. By Anthony Powell. Henry Holt & Co. \$2.

More of those lush, feckless souls. Whose lives are just as many bowls of cherries sunk in deep morasses. And gals who beg you to make passes.

Atwater leads the ginned parade, Beset betimes by this charade: Though queens in queues pout for his kisses, In Susan's lips alone his bliss is.

Susan, however's off of love. Travel's what she likes plenty of; And near at hand, inviting pillage, Are gals to crowd a Greenwich Village.

A village set in London town, Where men, it seems, slide quickly down, And in the end, lost to ambition, Swig rum at every intermission.

The style's a grade B Hemingway's. The characters lead lives to daze, A placid scribe whose daily lot Revolves around his wife and tot. D. W. L.

OBJECTIONS TO BRANCH CABELL

"THESE RESTLESS HEADS." By Branch Cabell. Robert M. McBride & Co. \$2.50.

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL. For all that I wish for Branch Cabell all kinds of good luck (within, of course, such moderate limits of success as any human being can find enduring in a lifelong acquaintance), and for all that I have read his first book with an interest such as I have not lately accorded the work of any other beginning writer, yet has this book left me unpleasantly impressed and pervasively irritated by its artless candors. In a beginner charity allows much. Yet there is no hiding the fact that the author of "These Restless Heads" is truthful; he is even in earnest; and if there be any third form of self-indulgence equally damaging to literary merits I do not know it.

I speak as any confirmed romantic must speak for force when confronted by the accused thing called "realism." I speak also as one who observes that this Branch Cabell has rendered into print an unflattering account of my household, of my personal foibles and of my hitherto private life.

Now this is a liberty taken at the cost of all logic. It is a misstep which makes this book a prolonged exercise in doing precisely what its writer proclaims he has never been able to do. In his nineteenth chapter, I mean, he speculates at prodigious length as to why he has at no time written anything which touched the known life about him; and to my opinion—to my, perhaps, biased opinion—his surmises wear an odd favor when they occur plump in the middle of a book which is, throughout its every paragraph, so completely and indeed, microscopically concerned with its writer's immediate surroundings.

Not is that quite all which troubles me in this book. The author of "These Restless Heads" seems to me regrettably overdone to dabble in rhetorical floridities. I note, for example, his reiteration of the refrain word "non-sense" at the close of each section of the book, and a kindred juggling with "contentment" in the code of the sections which are devoted, without any such thin trickery as figures in the prologue and the epilogue, to the writer's self. I observe, too, that in instances of onomatopoeia, as "this flag's fleet, unflinching, flipflop flapping" or the panoply of "like dead leaves scuttling and bustling affluter to rustle in dusty gutters," I regard the elaborate building up of long rhapsodies and tirades in order that the instant they reach completion their architect may close severely the pair of precise paragraphs about Agni and Hephaestus. I decide that common sense cannot but object to this overcautious handling everywhere of mere syllables as though they were diamonds.

Those and yet many other examples of the faux bon-as we humanists say by ordinary when we condemn whatever is admired by persons who do not admire us—I observe, I repeat, ruefully. It seems to me that the author of "These Restless Heads" has wasted a great deal of effort upon his filigree niceties. Such rhetorical love knots are at odds with the taste of our plain age, and one cannot but marvel at the infinite labor which a beginning author can devote even nowadays to the more difficult refinements of writing as an actual art, thus thriftlessly. We older writers have been taught long ago by our readers, in conjunction with our royalty statements, to indite otherwise. We do not attempt, in Branch Cabell's case, the infinite labor which a beginning author can devote even nowadays to the more difficult refinements of writing as an actual art, thus thriftlessly.

For the beginner, though, there is always hope, and "with time and experience, aided by the sympathetic appreciation of the reviewer," it may be that this Cabell also may learn to do better in a more modestly homespun fashion. Meanwhile I could wish, I confess, that the personality of this new writer were a tiny bit more attractive to me. There is everywhere, to my feeling, an aura of smug self-satisfaction over the completion of the biography of the life of Manuel (or, which is the name of the book, which I have not read, but which I have heard of) and a weak-spirited acceptance of the fact that this universe can prove both kindly and comfortable, such as no approved pessimist of my generation could avoid finding distasteful. This Branch Cabell in brief appears to enjoy life, however soberly; he indulges, to every practical intent, the time-annoying rulings of human wisdom, and among the better class of American writers that simply has not been done for the last twenty years or more.

Meanwhile the experts, ordinarily so retiring, enjoy a brief appearance beneath the spotlight. Books are published on the particular national school and, what is more, are sold in large numbers. Various monographs on French painting are already out, and Roger Fry is writing weekly articles in the New Statesman.

I do not know whether Fry's review as a critic extends beyond the limit of these shores. Himself the most genial of men, as a critic he is implacable and severe as only critics of the fine arts know how to be. This is often him for his intimidating if one asks him for his opinion of some picture that one happens oneself much to admire. Invariably he announces, though in the kindest way, that the picture is a glaring and clumsy fake, or, at all events, a poor example of the master's work. The moral to be deduced from such an experience is: Learn to have the courage of your own obliquity!

A critic of quite another brand is Clive Bell. He is not—he would not claim to be—an expert, so much as a literary popularizer of sculpture and painting; a function which he performs with great good humor and a method of approach, personal rather than portentous. Here is the primrose path of criticism, the path which, if we can afford to be sincere, we shall most of us admit that we prefer to tread. Clive Bell has all the apparatus of scholarship, but is too amiable a character to employ it ruthlessly. As the amateur metaphysician remarked to Boswell, somehow "cheerfulness is always breaking in."

PETER QUENNELL.

Royal Cortisoez writes an introduction for "Contemporary American Prints," just published in a limited edition by the American Art Dealers' Association.

Romance in Spain

ROMOUR AT NIGHTFALL. By Graham Greene. Doubleday. Doran. \$2.50.

The kind of romanticism which we find in "Romour at Nightfall" is a belated survival, or revival, of the Stevensonian romanticism of three or four decades ago. As might be expected, this romanticism is now somewhat impure and diluted. Greene, who is Stevenson's younger cousin, is inclined to mix his fantasy with more or less real characters and situations. And, strangely enough, there is even a touch of romanticism's opposite, naturalism. The author tells a story of love and intrigue in the Spanish Pyrenees, where the Government is in search of a rebel leader hiding in the mountains. Two English newspapermen, a Spanish girl and the rebel leader are the chief characters. The story relates the jealousy of the Englishmen over the girl, her faithlessness to the leader and the betrayal of one Englishman by the other. It ends with the death of the Englishman and the girl's marriage to the survivor.

The author is at his best in describing nature and in portraying minor characters. He does some really brilliant writing, for instance, in telling of Chase's ride down the mountains to San Juan in a storm, and in describing the Government forces' attack upon the rebels' camp. The cynical treatment of the women characters is, on the other hand, out of harmony with the rest of the story, and seems a bit shallow. It is not in keeping with the heroic mood of the events, or the grand passions implied in the characters' actions—and is surely not a part of true romanticism.

TENDERLY WRITTEN

WILD RYE. By Marjorie Hine. Appleton. \$2.

While this author's last book, "Ten Days' Wonder," was an amusing and sophisticated farce, this new book is a moving and tender story of a young girl in love. Jenny Rorke, motherless at seventeen, is sent to her mother's people to grow into maturity.

While with them she meets Thad Ryott, a talented young artist, who falls in love with Jenny and she with him. Her people force them to have a year's engagement, and Thad, who has temperament and a great need of women, is dismayed at the thought of a year's wait. Considering the Victorian times this was a great problem to these young people. Disobedience to her grandmother was out of the question to Jenny, so out of pity for Thad she gives herself to him. Then remorse takes hold of her and once more she believes they should not "sin," so Thad accepts her point of view and goes to paint a portrait of the lovely Linda, Jenny's cousin, who is very much in love with him and has no scruples about taking him from Jenny. Linda's husband discovers them and Thad is caught in a net of Linda's making. He is forced to stick by her, and Jenny is left alone. Thad knows he can never be worthy of her and Jenny feels that virtue is an empty reward for itself.

The author has placed this little tragedy in the Victorian period and has kept the atmosphere and social structure so well that one does not wonder at Jenny's code. It is pathetic and admirable; it is the only thing she can do. Thad, as the tempestuous lover, is a character that holds the reader's sympathy despite Jenny's being hurt, for he is a normal man living openly in those days the way the modern man does now. It is really the story of two lovers a little ahead of their times.

To alleviate the inevitable tragedy of the situation, Marjorie Hine has invested her story with some delightful dialogue and many amusing situations. She has created characters who are diverse in their effects upon the reader. There is Grandmother Dale, who is witty and gay in her eighties, and Grandfather Dale, who loves a pretty woman and spoils Linda. There is Aunt May, who is a social climber, and Aunt Effie, who is shallow and unpopular even with her own mother and who takes it all out on Jenny.

Then there are the leg of mutton sleeves, and balls where the Lancers is danced. There are broughams and bicycles and piano songs in the evenings. There is, in short, rather a nostalgic atmosphere through the whole book; and in contrast stand Jenny, Thad and Susannah, Thad's sister. These are the three who are fighting through the morass of convention to something finer and more honest, and being too early, they fail.

"Wild Rye" is not a very important book, but it is tenderly written and full of understanding. Jenny lives as truly as any modern girl and completely wins the heart of the reader with her struggles and confusion. This book will be enjoyed by those who like quiet stories of human nature that are not sugar-coated beyond recognition, and that yet have a breath of clean air about them.

ELIZABETH SANDERSON.

Arthur Elwood Elliott's "Paraguay" (Columbia University Press) is a discussion of the country's cultural heritage, social conditions and educational problems.



James Branch Cabell.

So Say We All

I FEEL BETTER NOW. By Margaret Fishback. Dutton.

So does the reader. The publishers give no price for the book—it's priceless. There are other adjectives: brittle, clever, subtle, satiric (in a gentle way). There are other adjectives it is not: cynical, sophisticated, modish, smart. Though now and again there is a pose, as when she laments:

Though I'd rather be wicked than good

Be yourself. There are too many fake Ninons around and some of them are writing what parts for smart verse that is not worth your grain of salt in your Manhattan clam oyster. Compliments to the New Yorker and Vanity Fair and any other magazine that gives you growing room so that you may

In your inevitable way grow more charming every day Which naturally means for me increased susceptibility.

Century has just published two more "White House Confessions" books on child health and protection. "Body Mechanics: Education and Practice," prepared by a subcommittee on orthopedics under the chairmanship of Robert B. Osgood, and "Psychology and Psychiatry in Pediatrics," the report of the subcommittee on these subjects, of which Bronson Crothers was chairman.

CULTURES IN CONFLICT

THEY NEVER COME BACK. By William Plomer. Coward-McCann. \$2.50.

There is apparently a type of mind that rejoices in racial generalizations, in such arbitrary dogma as that the Scotch are stingy or the Irish pugnacious.

The observations included in "They Never Come Back" are much more subtle than these, and they may be accurate, yet they have the same quality of being comments made in a vacuum, beyond all possibility of proof, their aptness depending largely upon the prejudices of the individual reader. The scene of the story is modern Japan, and the Japanese, naturally, serve as subjects for the comments, though occasionally hemispheres are involved, and East and West are spoken of as though all Orientals reacted in a fixed manner to a given situation, and all Occidentals obediently reacted to the same situation in the opposite manner.



Fifteenth Century Headdress.

These generalizations may be spoken of first, for they form much of the substance of Mr. Plomer's novel, and seem little more than dead weight to the story. Aside from them, "They Never Come Back" is a pleasant and readable novel, rather slight in the complications it evokes, but gracefully written, and containing individual passages of great charm. Vincent Lucas is a young Englishman visiting Japan, impelled by a motive no more substantial than a whim. He is, we are told, a typical young English artist, and on the boat he encounters two typical Japanese, one a liberal and one a reactionary; one skeptical of the benefits of Western progress, the other patriotic and aggressive. These two characters disappear, and never figure in the novel after Lucas lands; their only purpose, evidently, is to introduce a few pages of political observation.

A letter introduces Lucas to Iris, an English girl married to a Japanese. Simultaneously, he encounters Sado, an indecisive self-centered young man, and forms a friendship with him. The remainder of the novel is given over to an account of the decline and fall of this friendship, to characterizations of Iris and her husband, to additional psychological generalizations. In the end, as we have suspected, Iris and Lucas returns to England when his personal relationships grow slightly tense, after Sado has become disillusioned with him, and after he discovers Iris is in love with him.

"They Never Come Back" is comparable to "A Passage to India," but there is a fundamental difference between the two novels. In "A

Passage to India" we are introduced to characters whose fortunes are deeply involved in the political and racial problems of a foreign land—given as footnotes to the story, but are embodied in it in the nature of the adventures that occur.

We cannot take a situation very seriously if we feel that it can be permanently ended by some one buying a ticket to some other place. Is it this inconsequentiality of his character's problems that induces Mr. Plomer to insist upon them as types? "Sado," he writes, "like so many young Japanese of the present," or "Iris and Lucas belonged to a class and a generation which inherited little but chaos and decay," evidently refusing to consider his characters important if they do not conform with a multitude of others.

One feels that such generalizations should be left to the reader, and one feels it all the more strongly because Mr. Plomer can bring a fragment of the East to life in a happy descriptive phrase, only to smother it at once in vague and pompous moralizing. ROBERT CANTWELL.

NEW BOTTLE: OLD WINE

THE PRICE OF LIFE. By Vladimir Lidin. Harpers. \$2.

The judgments delivered to us in America about the allegedly new literature of Soviet Russia have been so numerous and conflicting that these first important products of Soviet writers to be printed here are sure to find an interested audience.

Yet it will be difficult for any one to discover anything either Soviet or "new," in the social sense, in this latest Russian novel. The vehemently anti-capitalistic who claim to have made some study of Russian writers have for years been assuring us that only party tracts, and not literary works, were possible within the borders of the Soviet Union. American Communists, on the other hand, have been declaring, with not too much patience, that our writers, who utter such an amount of much until they make an open revolt against the domination of the capitalist masters.

"The Price of Life" does nothing to clear up the controversy. We read on the jacket that it was put out in Russia by the State Publishing House, and there are intimations that Vladimir Lidin is well esteemed by the Communist authorities. It is, however, an exciting and masterfully written novel in a peculiarly old-fashioned way. To a reader who has not been imbued with Communist doctrine, what is immediately striking about it is its almost cunning avoidance of social theorizing.

This is a book which might have been written by a novelist of high talent who had read nothing later than Dostoevsky. It is a psychological study of the degeneration of a young university student in Moscow. Kiril Bessonov is a peasant boy with a traditionally Russian idealistic nature who is given an opportunity to study at the capital. In Moscow he lives in surroundings as wretched as any the older Russians wrote about. At first he is dazzled by the bright variegation of the city, and lifted by the stirrings of young love; but love fails, and his poverty becomes unbearably depressing. He is led by an idealistic girl, a girl of the generation which involves the loss of his youthful ideals, to robbery and murder; and at the very last he comes to the overwhelming yearning, so familiarly Russian, for spiritual expiation.

It is the changes brought about in Kiril's nature by the distracting chaos and the essential emptiness of the city that are important. There are moments when Kiril thinks of himself as a traitor to the new order, but these are infrequent and unimpressive, the author is obviously not concerned with setting up his protagonist as a horrible warning to those in Russia who might be tempted into disloyalty. He is, indeed, capable of suggestions of a quite reverse nature, as when Lidin, a young official, is made to say to Kiril: "You've had a taste of bohemianism here and have filled your head with nihilistic ideas—Soviet nihilism. Oh, it doesn't take the big towns long to ruin men." Lidin develops his study with the use of a completely convincing and inherently logical, but quite pre-Freudian, psychology, and his oddly lyrical style does more to remove the book from the realm of official categories.

This author's works were recently published in a collected edition by Government Printing House in Moscow, which might indicate in them a likely propaganda trend. "The Price of Life," however, is the most intensely individualistic novel that has come his way, of this reviewer in many months. Soviet Russia may

or may not be evolving a "new" literature, but this book is definite proof that the Russian peoples can breed artists of brilliance and profundity. CLIFTON CUTHBERT.

"As frank as any love adventure of our time... An extraordinary study of the modern woman." —Harry Hansen

THE END OF DESIRE

ROBERT HERRICK'S

New best-selling novel

6th Printing

FARRAR & RINEHART \$2.50

A Puzzler!
The BLACK ROSE MURDER

by Paul McGuire

BRENTANO'S Pub. \$2

THE SILVER BRIDE

In this new romance of love's struggle Ethel M. Dell probes the secret places of every woman's heart. A triangle with an unexpected twist.

by ETHEL M. DELL

Putnam's \$2.00

Correcting WM. LYON PHELPS

Prof. Phelps, in picking "the ten best books of last year," includes MARY'S NECK, by Booth Tarkington. We're delighted by this compliment, but the book won't be published till March. Prof. Phelps had an advance copy. So for one of the most entertaining novels of this or any other year, give your bookseller an order today. Read in all bookstores Monday. \$2.50



"Saxon Farm Workers." Eleventh century. In "Medieval Costume and Life," By Dorothy Hartley. Scribners. \$5.