

"Blencarrow"-Mrs. Isabel Mackay's Latest Canadian Story

(Reviewed by Roderick Random)

In considering any special period of the past in any country or district and the manners and customs that distinguish it, it is often the novelists to whom we turn when we wish mentally to reconstruct it. The people of their imagination that they made to live and love and hate are vivid and real to our

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alone, but surrounded by other, if lesser books. From the mass will rise the masterpiece! Our literary critics who would destroy what we produce because it is not of the highest literary excellence, merely blight the forest from which the excellent will come. Great Britain is usually regarded as our literary desideratum, and our people speak of "English books" as though they were all great, always had been great. The *London Bookman* for December says that 9,800 new books were to be produced in England in 1926, 2,000 of which were novels, 80 per cent. of which would fall still-born from the presses."

One of our leading critics told us in August that Canada was producing 37 new novels, and he wished the number had been seven.

*Value of a National Literature:
Consider the Hebrews*

How many people have spent half an hour considering what a national literature means to a nation. Is it because it is a hobby of mine that I submit that a nation's literature is the largest single influence in building up the civilization, the commercial supremacy and the esteem in which that country is held by the rest of the world? Of the literature, the commercial and racial supremacy of England I need not speak. Consider then another country about the same size and about 25 per cent. greater population. Who knows anything about Java? Wishes to go there? Java has a lamentable literary tradition and production. Consider the Hebrews, whom H. G. Wells in his *Outline of History* tells us were never a third-rate power, who had no artists, no explorers, no military conquerors, not even architects or builders, but who had writers: Writers who were so encouraged and fostered by the people that they declared, "Have I not written unto thee excellent things? This shall be written for the generations to come; that the peoples which will be created shall praise the Lord." And the answer of their people was: "Yea, it was written by the finger of God."

inner vision almost as if we had known them. Mr. Micawber, Becky Sharp, and Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and the people with whom their stories are intertwined in all their joys and tribulations, show us the England of their times with a considerable clearness and intimacy. In the United States, such writers as Mark Twain and Bret Harte, Mrs. Wharton and Booth Tarkington have given us the life of parts of that country in certain of their phases and periods and crystallized them with brilliancy and power for later generations.

Mrs. Isabel Ecclestone Mackay's recently published novel, "Blencar-



ISABEL E. MACKAY

row," makes the completion of a trilogy of novels from her pen which have made fresh for us our own Canadian Province of Ontario, as it was a generation ago, and which will live in our literature, by reason of their faithful and like-like characterization as well as by their narrative power.

"Blencarrow" depicts in a masterly way the life of a small Ontario town of a score of years ago. Its characters are individuals that are also true to their type. On the whole they are a lovable lot and their idiosyncrasies, when they have them, endear them to us. Elder Andrew Cameron, somewhat of a mystic, an inventor, absentminded at times but wise and dependable in the main, is conscience-stricken because his mind has strayed to worldly matters on the sacred day. He says to his wife in a voice tense with contriteness mingled with elation: "Janet! . . . mind you, I'm no sure . . . I'm no just certain . . . but my mind misdoubts me . . . woman, I'm terrible feart I've invented a plough upon the Sabbath!" Janet, his wife, is his true helpmate, equally lovable but as femi-

nine in her inconsistencies as he is the opposite in his steadfastness and uncompromising sense of justice and fair-play. As Euan, their boy, senses it, "his mother, with her quick eyes and fertile brain, was 'knowing,' but his father knew."

The Fenwell family with the ne'er-do-weel father, the patient, long-suffering mother, and the two daughters, so unlike each other and each so striking in her way, are splendidly portrayed. Kathryn is a heroine who wins our interest and sympathies. Her sister, beautiful but selfish and shallow, makes a good contrast and, even in her, there is the chance of rising to better things by the union of her weakness with the strength of her lover, Con, and the purifying power of a true passion.

Garry, who is coming out for the Anglican priesthood, and his uncle, the Rector, are both fine studies, and react upon one another in a way which the author has brought out most convincingly. There is a sureness in Mrs. Mackay's grasp of mental processes which secures the reader's confidence. One does not often question her conclusions. And her dialogue has the same quality of rightness so that every speech falls from the lips of the speaker naturally and inevitably. Often sparkling with wit and fancy, it never seems forced or far-fetched. Pointed with shrewd comment and pregnant phrase and at times dipping into the deep things of life, it reflects the more sterling qualities of a folk who, on the whole, looked upon life seriously and tried to live up to its responsibilities. Always, however, its seriousness is illumined and relieved by gleams of that humour that scintillates here and there throughout the book.

As to the story itself, the plot is simple and centres about the half-finished dwelling of the Fenwells with its outside door on the second story, which was opened on to nothingness and was always kept locked for fear the master of the house in one of his dreams of grandeur, might step through it and break his neck. In this very simplicity, Mrs. Mackay has shown her skill, for she carries the reader with her from the first chapter and maintains the interest to the end. Through tragedy, the happy outcome is attained.

Here is a book within which the picture drawn is stereoscopic, not photographic merely. It has depth and atmosphere and is drawn without exaggeration, blending finely the two qualities, sincerity and charm, which make for real and lasting literature.