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STEPHEN CRANE: A NEGLECTED GENIUS Bates, H E The Bookman; Oct 1931; 81, 481; ProQuest pg. 10

STEPHEN CRANE: A NEGLECTED GENIUS

By H. E. Bates

IF you would amuse yourself at the expense of booksellers, both small and great, inquire for the works of Stephen Crane. Crane was born in 1871, at a significant moment in his country's history, in New Jersey. Twenty years later, at an age when Tolstoy and Conrad and Maupassant and such writers had each been groping through the elementary stages of his craft, he produced a novel which Conrad himself described as "a gem" and which gained for him in England an astonishing position not only in the world of letters but in the world of popularity too. Like many another young man he wrote a book on war. Its title has that inevitable, familiar sound which causes the reader to think of it as something already classic and immemorial —"The Red Badge of Courage."

Portrait by Yvonne Gregory. **H. E. Bates.**

The war which Crane had chosen to describe was the American Civil War. His conceptions of war were revolutionary; his book was unromantic, bitter, imaginative, perfect in detail and more important still perfect in atmosphere. The present generation was not the first to be concerned with the brutality of war or to attempt to search for the elemental truths behind it. Crane, ironical, remorseless, superbly detached, caught the very tone of war perfectly, its futility and grimness, its horror and waste. His hero was a young man: as it might be himself. His most intimate thoughts and impressions and emotions were so perfectly delineated that the reader felt at once that he was tasting the bitterness of a personal and youthful experience. "The Red Badge of Courage" indeed created a sensation. It was compared with Tolstoy; it was held above Zola. All this however was only in England. In America "The Red Badge of Courage" found little favour. It was often returned to the booksellers; it was too grim; it had no love interest. The veterans, like the veterans of every age, were indignant and angry; the book was "damned nonsense" and there were passages in it in which they saw themselves and their country's honour insulted.

All this, to Crane himself, must have been amusing. For the truth of it all was that the book was not autobiographical. Experience of war had no part in it. Crane had never been to war. He had indeed been born too late even to enter as an infant the battles of the Civil War he had described so vividly and unforgettably.

What had Crane done? How had he been able to catch so perfectly the accent and atmosphere of something in which he had never taken part?

He had done nothing but trust his amazing imagination. He had relied unfalteringly on his instincts. The book had been written without advice or the warmth of encouragement but his instinct for swift impressions, his genius for psychology and his wonderful creative force had worked a perfect miracle. He had been urged to write, as Edward Garnett observed, by the demon within him, and his genius was passionate and clear enough to flare up above the inhibitions and conventions of his day.

When "The Red Badge of Courage" appeared in 1895 Crane, the artist, was fully equipped. He lacked nothing; his method was astonishingly perfect. Crane has been compared with Tchehov, but Crane himself confessed to Edward Garnett that he had read nothing of Tchehov or of any other Russian. "Would that he had!" comments Garnett. "For Crane, as Conrad reminded me, never knew how good his best work was. He simply never knew. He never recognised that in the volume 'The Open Boat' he had achieved the perfection of his method."

"The Open Boat" appeared in 1898. It was a volume of short stories. Obviously Crane was perfectly equipped for the short story: his instinct for arresting impressions, his genius for colloquial conversation, his unerring knowledge of human passions were all powerful natural gifts. His compressed style had a compelling intensity, a gay audacity of epithet and a matchless colour and irony. By one splash of unexpected colour Crane could evolve a whole scene. As a writer of stories he needed nothing more.

In "The Open Boat" he did indeed achieve the perfection of his method. The whole volume is like a collection of bright audacious paintings. Sometimes the stories remind one forcibly of the stories of Ernest Hemmingway. Both Hemmingway and Crane are impressionists, both have a power of arresting description and both mix reporting with their writing: a danger to which Crane was eventually to succumb. Hemmingway is perhaps the most significant young writer that America possesses to-day; thirty years ago that position was Crane's. Yet to-day who reads Crane?

The position is tragic and astonishing. I doubt very much if "The Open Boat" has been reprinted in England for a quarter of a century. To the coming generation it seems as if that volume of Crane's most brilliant writing will be as rare as the sight of a gold sovereign.

The reader in search of Crane, however, must be cautious. He will be tempted to throw "Whilomville Stories," a very commonplace volume, at the wall, and "On Active Service" with it. He will see something fresh and light in "The Third Violet," but nothing better, and more than half of "Wounds in the Rain" may disappoint him. Crane indeed prostituted himself. Coming to England at the height of his success he made many friends, but a crew of journalists surrounded him too. He began to live extravagantly, gave fabulous parties, spent money wildly, and wrote against time and debts. He had already mixed reporting

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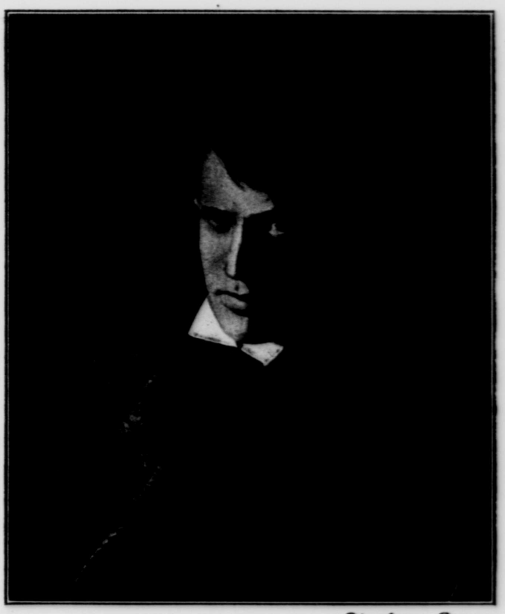
with his writing and new editors gave him plenty of temptation to report altogether, and he reported. The artist in him was succumbing long before he himself eventually died of consumption.

He did not die, however, before making a discovery which gave him the keenest pleasure. " The Red Badge of Courage " had been written in with the sheer ardent passion of youth, without experience. Returning from the Græco-Turkish war as a correspondent Crane confided with great delight to Conrad :

" My picture of war was all right. I have found it as I imagined it."

There, at once, is the essence and the highest praise of Crane's genius. His power of imagination is so vivid and individual and certain that as long as he relies absolutely upon it he seems to do nothing wrong. One has only to look at his two powerful stories of the Bowery, " Maggie " and " George's Mother," to prove this. Both are masterpieces in his own particular method.

" George's Mother " was written at the age of twenty-one, and " Maggie " is roughly contemporary. Both are studies in tragic impressionism of New York slum life. They are written with an economy of material, a perspective and a sense of irony and justice that are all beyond reproach, and " Maggie " has all the profound emotion and inevitable finality of Greek tragedy. Crane was never so good as when seeking to understand and describe man's most primitive emotions. Fear, anger, hatred, jealousy, terror, laughter—Crane's spontaneous reactions to these emotions is wonderful. And he is always remorseless ; in his finest work his values, however fierce, are never wrong ; there is nothing second-hand, meretricious or made up about his work. It is odious to make him the subject of comparisons ; superficially he may resemble this writer or that and he shares with Joseph Conrad a genius for creating a peculiar intensity of atmosphere ; beyond that his own brilliant arresting art is unique.



Stephen Crane.

I have suggested that Crane is not read. Actually he has a steady and enthusiastic following among the Americans, who thirty years ago would not look at him ; it appears to be in England that he lacks attention, where thirty years ago he was lionised and spoilt by a blaze of popularity.

The situation has its ironies, and doubtless Crane, the remorseless creator of " Maggie," " The Open Boat " and " The Blue Hotel," would not have missed them.

THE STORY-TELLER IN FICTION

By Phyllis Bentley

WHEN I was a child one of my brothers would sometimes declaim to me the following piece of doggerel :

> " It was a dark and stormy night,
> And the chief said unto Antonio :
> ' Antonio, tell us a tale.'
> And this was the tale he told :
> ' It was a dark and stormy night,
> And the chief said unto Antonio,
> " Antonio, tell us a tale."
> And this was the tale he told :
> " It was a . . ." ' "

And so on, *ad lib.* and *da capo*, the only limit to the story being the patience of the listener. Where this facetious history came from I do not know, but it gave me my first encounter with the " story-teller " in fiction. For many youthful years I did not cease to hope that some day I should reach the point where Antonio really did tell a tale—either about himself or some other Antonio, I did not mind which—to his circle of listening brigands. In later years the Antonios of fiction have interested me in another way, as a piece of technique, a literary device ; and it has seemed worth while to note the variations of the device, the effects it secures, and the gain or loss it carries in its train.

The chief use of the story-teller device in fiction, and perhaps the simplest, has been as a framework to a series of detached short tales. In this guise the device has been used by innumerable writers of every age and clime, including such diverse types as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hans Andersen, Boccaccio and Thomas Hardy. But even in this simple form there are variations ; some writers use one narrator to tell the whole series of tales, others allot a separate story-teller to

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