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# "Old Wells Again—still at it"



Sinclair Lewis, whose latest novel, "Ann Vickers," is reviewed here

LET us put the propagandists first: their books are more topical, and age should be honoured. The young, the poets, can always wait. Moreover, poetry keeps fresh, and sooner or later propaganda has a sad, stale stink about it.

And because there are still signs of the artist alive in the Wells of "The Bulpington of Blup," let us put Wells first of all. Picking up the book, I thought, as thousands of readers will no doubt think: "Ah! here is old Wells again.

## Books Reviewed

THE BULPINGTON OF BLUP. By H. G. Wells. (Hutchinson. 8 6 net.)  
ANN VICKERS. By Sinclair Lewis. (Cape. 7 6 net.)  
POCAHONTAS. By David Garnett. (Chatto and Windus. 8 6 net.)  
LIGHT IN AUGUST. By William Faulkner. (Chatto and Windus. 8 6 net.)

Still at it. Still trying to keep it up. Why doesn't he retire, gracefully and decently? Why doesn't he rest on the laurels of twenty years ago? And what a title! Who in heaven's name is going to read a book with that sort of title? "The Bulpington of Blup!"

What a title indeed! And what a book! "The Bulpington of Blup" is an electric bit of work, as electric and vivid and captivating as any bit of work that Wells gave us in what I suppose we must call the years of his maturity. "What's Wells like?" I once asked a publisher, and got the reply: "He's a live wire, he's electric," which is precisely the impression from "The Bulpington of Blup."

Wells himself is fond of calling himself a journalist—only a journalist—and in a sense "The Bulpington of Blup," this ironical, caustic, witty tale of a prig which is also a social history of England from the end of the 19th century down to the present day, is the work of a journalist.

Yet if Wells is a journalist, Dickens is also a journalist. There is the same compelling gusto and rich flavour of humanity about "The Bulpington of Blup" as a novel by Dickens, and, like Dickens, Wells has taken a type in Bulpington and by running his own electric current through his sawdust body has turned him almost—not quite—into a living character.

And what a book! The Bulpington of Blup is an electric bit of work, as electric, vivid, and captivating as any bit of work that Wells has given us.

He has given him liveliness, but not life, and for that reason he is able to be merciless in his satire of him. It is a satire which never pains us. We can stand back every moment, from the time Bulpington first resolves to call himself *The Bulpington* to the time when he is Captain Blup

By H. E. Bates

Bulpington, the complete humbug, and laugh at him and share Wells's own malicious fun-making without a twinge of conscience or pity. Yes, the propagandist and the journalist have been at work in this book, but the touch of the artist is deliciously evident in every page.

There is always this touch of the artist, however slight, in all Wells's work, but Sinclair Lewis is nothing but the pure propagandist-journalist, and he is probably the worst stylist in contemporary American letters, which is saying a great deal.

His method of writing seems to consist of stringing together a series of trite remarks, odd adjectives, colloquialisms, newspaper headings, and clichés, and decorating the string with many exclamation marks and capital letters, all without rhythm or style or a trace of colour and beauty. The construction of his novels is pitiful in its crudity. His humour is pawky. His psychology is that of a provincial newspaper reporter.

All these things can be found abundantly in "Ann Vickers," his first novel with a woman as the principal character. But the subject of "Ann Vickers" makes them all forgivable. The book purports to be a portrait of the modern business woman, social worker, and pessimist, but in reality it is a powerful bit of propaganda against the modern prison system of America. And for that one thanks Lewis. "Ann Vickers" is long overdue.

From the propagandists of the Sinclair Lewis type to poets of the rare quality of Mr. David Garnett is a long jump. After Lewis's cheap, unrhymical, journalistic style, it is refreshing to turn to Mr. Garnett's prose, reminiscent at times of Turgenyev and at others of George Moore, which is as full of warmth and colour and imagery and beauty as an English summer day.

In taking Pocahontas, the Indian princess brought to London by the Governor of Virginia in the 16th century, as his heroine, Mr. Garnett has again shown himself to be the chameleon of contemporary letters.

He changes his colour from book to book, as it were, with delightful unexpectedness, and yet succeeds in remaining himself. He has written novels on the oddest and diverser subjects, from foxes and nergresses to locusts and long-distance flights. It would not be in the least astonishing if he were suddenly to write a novel about Zulus or car-bandits, and still less astonishing if he did it successfully.

"Pocahontas" is a piece of history told in poetry; it is neither a novel nor a bit of fictionalised biography.

"Facts," says Mr. Garnett, "begin by inspiring the imagination; they end by imprisoning it in a strait-waistcoat. The persons, the places and, with few excep-

tions, the events here recorded are historical."

His task has been to take a group of dead figures and literally breathe life into them, and his ambition "to draw an accurate historical picture and to make it a work of art." And he has succeeded. Except that the Virginian scenes are a little too leisurely, and that the book drags a little in the middle, the story of Pocahontas has come off completely. And she herself has been recreated; she is not merely a rejuvenated figure out of a history-book, but a wistful, touching, tragic figure of eternal womanhood.

With "Light in August," his fifth novel, Mr. William Faulkner reveals himself as the most extraordinary novelist in contemporary American literature. It is not too much to say of "Light in August" that as a work of pure imagination, created and sustained with the intensest power from the first page to the last, it is the finest and most exciting novel that has come out of America for a very long time.

The story begins with a young woman setting out across America to find the father of the child she is about to bear; and out of that journey arise the most extraordinarily dramatic and moving events. "Light in August" completely satisfies both the mind and the emotions. Mr. Faulkner's future possibilities as a novelist are truly immense.

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