

A HUNDRED BEST BOOKS

SISTER MAURA

SELECTING "best books" has become quite a fashion. John Erskine's *Outline of Readings in Important Books for the General Honors Course in Columbia College, Columbia University*, probably established the vogue. This was published in 1924, but Mr. Erskine had given his course as early as 1919. His list of well over a hundred books contains a striking proportion of ancient classics, twenty-five from Greek literature and seven from Latin. In the nineteen-twenties, these were masterpieces neglected by the general public, but they are more widely read now.

Among the "hundred best books" used in the curriculum of St. John's College, N. Y., Greeks bear away the palm for numbers. This list, like Mr. Erskine's, is highly academic; but the American Library Association's "hundred books which every American should read" are more to the popular taste; they range from Shakespeare's *Plays* to Cheyney's *World History of Art* and take in ninety-eight general favorites on the way. A list of seven hundred notables was published by the *New York Times* as books that should be in every American home library.

But what of Canada? That young country, loyal member of the British Commonwealth of Nations and closest friend of the United States of America! Her choice is somewhat differently conditioned. The present article is an attempt to make an appropriate selection, and to justify those inclusions that may raise a question. The "best" of the title is a relative term; means best in the judgment of a teacher for students of literature in a Canadian college. For one reason or another, the following books have been chosen:

RELIGION

Holy Bible
The Imitation of Christ
Bunyan: *Pilgrim's Progress*
A book of hymns

EPIC POETRY

Dante: *The Divine Comedy*
Milton: *Paradise Lost*
Homer: *Iliad*
Vergil: *Aeneid*
Nibelungenlied
La Chanson de Roland

POETRY, LYRIC AND NARRATIVE

- Palgrave: *The Golden Treasury*
 Quiller-Couch: *The Oxford Book of English Verse*
 Chaucer: *Canterbury Tales*
 Pope: *The Rape of the Lock*
 Tennyson: *Poems*
 Longfellow: *Poetical Works*
 Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Poems*
 Carman: *Poems*
 E. J. Pratt: *Collected Poems*
 Audrey Brown: *A Dryad in Nanaimo*

HISTORY

- Thucydides: *History of the Peloponnesian War*
 Cicero: *Letters*
 Plutarch: *Lives*
 Augustine: *Confessions*
 Froissart: *Chronicles*
 Malory: *La Morte d'Arthur*
 Green: *A Short History of the English People*
 Murray Gibbon: *Canadian Mosaic*

ESSAYS

- Cicero: *De Amicitia*
 Bacon: *Essays*
 Addison and Steele: *Sir Roger de Coverley*
 Lamb: *Essays of Elia*
 Haliburton: *The Clockmaker*
 Holmes: *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*
 Emerson: *Essays*
 Belloc: *Avril*
 Leacock: *My Discovery of England*
 Dimnet: *The Art of Thinking*
 Struther: *Mrs. Miniver*
 Kirkconnell: *Seven Pillars of Freedom*
 Barzun: *Teacher in America*

NOVELS

- Cervantes: *Don Quixote*
 Goldsmith: *The Vicar of Wakefield*
 Scott: *Old Mortality*
 Dickens: *Pickwick Papers*
 Thackeray: *Henry Esmond*
 Cooper: *The Last of the Mohicans*
 Kirby: *The Golden Dog*
 Hardy: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*
 Conrad: *The Nigger of the Narcissus*
 Parker: *The Trail of the Sword*
 Galsworthy: *The Forsyte Saga*
 Sheehan: *My New Curate*
 Kipling: *Kim*

Sienkiewicz: *Quo Vadis?*
 Hemon: *Maria Chapdelaine*
 Undset: *Kristin Lavransdatter*
 Morley: *The Haunted Bookshop*
 Cather: *Shadows on the Rock*
 Waugh: *Brideshead Revisited*

SHORT STORY

Poe: *Works*
 Harte: *Short Stories*
 O. Henry: *Collected Works*
 Katherine Mansfield: *Collected Short Stories*
 Conan Doyle: *Sherlock Holmes Omnibus*
 Chesterton: *Father Brown Omnibus*

CHILDREN'S STORIES

Swift: *Gulliver's Travels*
 Hans Andersen: *Fairy Tales*
 La Motte-Fouqué: *Undine*
The Little Girl from under the Lake
 Carroll: *Alice in Wonderland*
 Graham: *The Wind in the Willows*
 Montgomery: *Anne of Green Gables*

DRAMA

Sophocles: *Antigone*
 Marlowe: *Doctor Faustus*
 Shakespeare: *Plays*
 Corneille: *Le Cid*
 Molière: *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*
 Goldsmith: *She Stoops to Conquer*
 Sheridan: *The School for Scandal*
 Goethe: *Faust*
 Gilbert and Sullivan: *Pinafore*
 Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*
 Shaw: *Candida*
 Barrie: *Dear Brutus*
 Synge: *Deirdre of the Sorrows*
 Sierra: *The Kingdom of God, The Romantic Young Lady*
 O'Neill: *Anna Christie, The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape*

SCIENCE

Osler: *Student Life*, in Morley's *Modern Essays*
 Beebe: *A Yard of Jungle*, in Alden's *Essays, English and American*

CRITICISM

Thomas Aquinas: *Summa*, Part 2, Number I, Question II
 Aristotle: *Poetics*
 Horace: *Ars Poetica*

Quintilian: *Institutio Oratoria*

Boileau: *Satires* and *L'Art Poétique*

Bodkin: *Approach to Painting*

Hubbard, Liebling, and Henderson: *Theory of Music*

Smith and Parks: *The Great Critics*

The Bible first! In this case, because it contains the most glorious poetry in the world. Besides, its teaching can answer the riddle that is human life—the “thoughts that wander through eternity,” the deep desire for abiding joy, the endless for infinite truth. After the Bible, at an immeasurable distance, *The Imitation of Christ*. No apology is needed for including this book of prayer, meditation, and counsel; it has befriended millions of souls. Harvard College Library possesses a famous collection of more than twenty-four hundred volumes in sixty-three languages, the earliest being a first edition *Imitatio Christi*, dating 1471.

Pilgrim's Progress, that spiritual classic, awakens an echo in every soul, but the book on hymns is another matter. My own choice would be Matthew Britt's *Hymns of the Breviary and Missal*. This ranges in time from the days of Ambrose (340-397) to the present; it quotes the original Latin with a literal translation, and also good metrical versions by a variety of scholars. Popular Latin hymns date to Palm Sunday, 386, when the tyrannical Empress Justina tried to seize the basilica of Milan. Ambrose lightened the hearts of his beleaguered faithful by having them sing hymns in the vernacular, which was Latin in those days and in that land. These early hymns were in free verse, like the jubilant *Exultet*, sung at Easter time, beginning:

*Exultet iam angelica turba coelorum,
Exultent divina mysteria,
Et pro tanti Regis victoria,
Tuba insonat salutaris.*

For the liturgic songs which later won Ambrose the title of Father of Latin Hymnody, he chose the stanza form of the marching songs of victorious legionaries; this pattern may be illustrated by four realistic lines from *Song at Cockcrow*, a hymn for Lauds:

*Surgamus ergo strenue;
Gallus jacentes excitat
Et somnolentes increpat,
Gallus negantes arguit.*

From that day to this, a quatrain of trochaic or iambic tetrameters has been the favoured hymn stanza.

Epic poetry reaches the difficult summit of its perfection in *The Divine Comedy*; this is perfect in symmetrical magnitude of structure, perfect in the elaboration of a tremendous theme, perfect in the soaring quality of its poetry, perfect in its human integrity. Then, there is the burnished magnificence of *Paradise Lost*, the sunrise charm of the *Iliad*, the suavity of the *Aeneid* written in "the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man." There is the mighty *lied* of Siegfried and his stormy loves, and that other great "song" in which Roland winds a tragic horn at Roncevaux.

Cuchullain, a princely figure from the Celtic past, is a stranger well worth knowing, eminently the hero of high-hearted youth. Standish O'Grady writes the story in poetic prose. George Russell, in his introduction to this work, says: "We praise the man who rushes into a burning mansion and brings out its greatest treasure. So ought we to praise this man who rescued from the perishing Gaelic tradition its darling hero and restored him to us; and I think now that Cuchullain will not perish, but that he will be present at many a council of youth; that he will be the daring which lifts the will beyond itself and fires it for great causes, and that he will also be the courtesy which shall overcome the enemy that nothing else may overcome."

Though Canada has no epic of note, a number of E. J. Pratt's poems have a notable magnitude of theme and treatment, especially *Brebeuf and His Brethren*. Audrey Brown excels in the narrative form proper. Her most striking achievement is, perhaps, *The Wendigo*, which weaves a formless horror of Indian folk lore into a web of beauty. Carman's lyrics triumph in singing loveliness. Of another kind—wild, compelling, and often beautiful—are the poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins. Their publication by Robert Bridges in 1918 marks, if not an epoch, at least a period, in modern poetry.

HISTORY. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is quoted as saying that "No man should die before he has read all of Thucydides's *History* in Greek." But those who miss, perforce, this unforgettable experience, can find compensation in reading Jowett's excellent translation, or that edited by Sir Richard Livingstone in 1943. A current book on the subject is Professor Lousis E. Lord's *Thucydides and the World War*. Cicero's *Letters* throw fascinating sidelights on public life in the Roman

world at its prime; Augustine's *Confessions*, on the other hand, are a strictly human document, giving with rare sincerity the history of a soul.

ESSAY. In Belloc's *Avril* essays, the reader breathes the very air of the Renaissance spring, that joyous season when

*Le temps a lassié son manteau
De vent, de froidure et de pluie,
Et s'est vestu de brouderie,
De soleil luyant, cler et beau.*

Leacock's practical wisdom is probably at its best in *My Discovery of England*, though alloyed with much rollicking nonsense. *Oxford as I See it*, *The British and the American Press*, and *We Have with Us To-night* set forth ideas that are a distinct contribution to knowledge. Watson Kirkconnell's *Pillars of Freedom* are seven informative essays, lucid, trenchant, irrefutable.

NOVEL. *Old Mortality*, though not Scott's most popular, is his finest historical novel; it makes past days of dark and turbulent religious passion live again, and brings upon the stage of time such characters as Claverhouse, Burley, Sergeant Bothwell, to say nothing of Cuddie Headrigg and Mause, Jenny Dennison, and Tam Halliday. *Pickwick Papers* is not so glamorous as other novels by its author, but its buoyant humor and humanity make it the essential Dickens. Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* is a more artistic achievement than *Vanity Fair*, being a great love story in an authentic Queen Anne setting. Sir Gilbert Parker's adventurous *Trail of the Sword* has one chapter—*Qui Vive?*—that catches the glamor and glow and glory of a high moment that might have come in the life of a gallant voyageur—Pierre LeMoyné d'Iberville. Soames of *The Forsyte Saga* is, I think, Galsworthy's best character creation, as the insufferable Idol in his worst. In *The Haunted Bookshop*, chapters I, II, and III, Christopher Morley invests a rather shabby second-hand book store in Brooklyn with the genuine magic of literature.

SHORT STORY. The works of Edgar Allan Poe, Bret Harte, O. Henry, and Katherine Mansfield compass the life history of the recent short story. Of the group, Poe is the most artistic, Harte the most sincere, O. Henry the most popular, and Katherine Mansfield the most charming. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories of the nineteenth century set the accepted standard of detective fiction. In this twentieth century, Chesterton created a new type which is influencing a number of writers

of the day, though they cannot imitate his genius. He retains the enigma element, but lifts the whole story to a higher plane, that is philosophical, and even theological; his style is rich, vigorous, and intellectual.

CHILDREN'S STORIES. It is an ironic fate indeed that has made Swift's sabre-toothed satire on humanity a fairy tale book. Motte-Fouqué's lovely *Undine*, read in childhood, will shed its gentle radiance through a lifetime. Fair lore, folk lore, a home in Ireland, and a castle in Spain make *The Little Girl from under the Lake* a delightful story; its title is what a title should be—telling and provocative. Of Kenneth Graham's beloved classic, none can speak more fittingly than Milne, himself a writer of whimsical books for children. "*The Wind in the Willows*," he says, "is what I call a Household Book, a book which everybody in the household loves and quotes continually ever after . . . Usually I speak about it in my first meeting with a stranger. It is my opening remark, just as yours is something futile about the weather. If I can't get it in at the beginning, I squeeze it in at the end. The stranger has got to have it sometime. Should I ever find myself in the dock, and one never knows, my answer to the question whether I had anything to say, would be, 'Well, my lord, if I might just recommend a book to the jury before leaving.'"

DRAMA. Barrie has been both condemned as sentimental and criticized as ruthless. Though he has not the biting honesty of Shaw, he does offer a keen and sincere commentary on human life and character. The very best of Barrie is, I think, the dream daughter episode in *Dear Brutus*; this has real enchantment, and subtly brightens the close of the play with the hope that the selfish Alice has had a change of heart. Gregorio and Maria Sierra excel in light comedy, but they have written also several of the best religious plays of the century. *The Kingdom of God* and *The Romantic Young Lady*, together, will completely represent them. Eugene O'Neill, who brought back to the stage the monologue and aside of the past and also developed a new, distinctive dramatic technique, has written nothing better than *Anna Christie*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *The Hairy Ape*.

SCIENCE. The shifting scene of science and the plain style it prefers do not favour the production of masterpieces of literature; yet certain scientists are gifted writers. Sir William Osler's *Student Life* and Williem Beebe's *A Yard of Jungle* illustrate

this scientific work that has the graces of literature. Osler discusses his subject against a background of wide cultural knowledge; he concludes his essay by classifying students as either larks or owls, giving the characteristics of each, and explaining them as probably due to thermal differences. Beebe's essay, more scientific in tone, is not less interesting.

CRITICISM. The first choice here, from Thomas Aquinas, explains the nature of enjoyment in a high and philosophic strain, and more than justifies the pleasure a reader takes in good literature. *The Approach to Painting* is a competent guide to the appreciation of art. Mr. Bodkin condemns the ultra-moderns in almost violent terms, but his strongest argument against them is the contrast between two pictures which he presents: one, *The Two Sisters* by Theodore Chassériau, and the other, *Two Calligraphic Women* by Picasso. The latter lacks even the character and verisimilitude possessed by Maurice Baring's portraits of Sarah Bernhardt, drawn when he was a child of seven. (*The Puppet Show of Memory*, page 228). *The Great Critics* is something more than a collection of samples; it illustrates the trend of literary criticism from the days of Socrates to those of Walter Pater, and quotes largely from such authorities as Dante, Sidney, Dryden, Coleridge, and Arnold.

So often the reader's reaction to a book or an article is merely an instinctive decision for or against! The reasons for it are never clarified, but left supinely dormant. A proper course in literary criticism can teach the intellect to become articulate, and it can also furnish time-tried canons of art as standards of judgment—these to be supplemented, of course, by native good sense and good taste. The keen-eyed critic, sympathetic as well as caustic, has a stimulating rôle to play in the creation of a national literature.