

VIEWS OF READERS

Mr. Dixon and History—
"Virginia" Again

New York Times Review of Books:

AMONG one of a large circle of readers who have enjoyed "The Southerner," for Thomas Dixon has written of a period which will ever exert a potent appeal to Americans—the stirring days of 1861-65.

Mr. Dixon has great command of language, and he draws a pen picture of battles, intrigues, and swiftly moving events which carry the reader along with breathless interest. But in the preface of the novel he has challenged the attention of the historians by announcing that "every word in it relating to the issues of our national life has been drawn from authentic records in my possession. Nor have I at any point taken a liberty with an essential detail in historical scenes."

It is impossible to weave fiction around fact without coloring the latter, and with the best intentions in the world Mr. Dixon has fallen unconsciously into the customary pitfall.

In this novel he pays a magnificent tribute to Abraham Lincoln, although he has undoubtedly painted the great emancipator from a Southern standpoint only. The fault of the book is that he has made him too temporizing. Lincoln was great hearted, patient, and long-suffering, but he had the courage of his convictions.

In the opening chapters of "The Southerner" Mr. Dixon overdraws the uncoothness of Tom Lincoln, the pioneer father of Abraham, and in exalting the former's wife, Nancy Hanks, to a corresponding degree has made her incongruous. She is too superior for her surroundings; if she had been as spiritual as he painted her she would never have married Tom.

In speaking of Abraham Lincoln's personal appearance Mr. Dixon's statements are constantly misleading. On Page 188 he says:

The first impression (of Lincoln) was one of enormous strength. He looked every inch the stalwart backwoods athlete. . . .

and throughout the book he alludes to his "giant frame" and "giant figure."

In reality, Lincoln, while exceptionally tall, was loose-jointed, with narrow chest and sloping shoulders, and a shambling walk. There was nothing about him to indicate physical strength. His rugged, benign face, the joy of the cartoonist, depicted the wonderful intellect and high moral courage of the born leader of men. Nor is "shaggy" descriptive of Lincoln's hair, which was kept neatly, as well as his close-cropped black beard.

Mr. Dixon also speaks of "the huge figure of Senator Wigfall of Texas." On the contrary, Senator Wigfall was of medium height and fat.

In describing Lincoln's first inaugural Mr. Dixon states that "the Marine Band struck the first notes of the National Anthem . . ." To what does Mr. Dixon allude? There was no national anthem then.

Probably the most discussed incident of the book is the scene in which Lincoln offers to abdicate to Gen. George B. McClellan. The author has undoubtedly founded the incident on a footnote in Nicolay and Hay's "History of Abraham Lincoln," Vol. IX., Page 251.

The footnote refers to the following incident. In discussing his re-election with his Cabinet on Nov. 11, 1864, Lincoln produced a sealed paper which he had written on Aug. 23, six days before the Chicago nominating convention, stating that he would co-operate with the next President-elect (so sure was he that he himself would be defeated) so as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration. Handing the paper to his Cabinet, he then declared:

" . . . I resolved that on Aug. 23, in case of the election of Gen. McClellan, being certain that he would be the candidate, that I would see him and talk matters over with him. I would say, 'General, the election has demonstrated that you are stronger, have more influence with the American people than I. Now let us together, you with your influence, and I with all the Executive power of the Government, try to save the country. You raise as many troops as you possibly can, for this final trial, and I will devote all my energy to assist and finish this war.'"

If Lincoln really had personally made a proposition to abdicate to McClellan, as Mr. Dixon cleverly depicts in his book, the world would have heard of it before this. McClellan, who enjoyed heroic posturing, would never have kept such an interview a secret. He would instantly have made political capital of

it. He would also most certainly have alluded to it in his "Own History," written twenty years after the war; or mentioned it in his voluminous report of his entire military history, which was written shortly after the time the scene with Lincoln is alleged to have occurred.

Allowing for "poetical license," it was perfectly permissible for Mr. Dixon to take the actual event chronicled above and distort the facts so that Lincoln is made to offer to abdicate to McClellan, but it can only rank as a piece of fiction, and he should never have announced that he did not tamper with historical events.

An impossible fiction occurrence in the book is where Mr. Dixon has his heroine, Betty Winter, serve lemonade and cake to the soldiers on their retreat to the national capital from the battlefield of the first Bull Run. Washington, overrun by frenzied, exhausted and drunken soldiers, was panic-stricken. No one knew what would happen next, and the wildest rumors were afloat. Only men thronged the streets, and the women of Betty Winter's supposed social standing were forbidden to venture out of doors while such chaos lasted.

In the prologue, which depicts Abraham Lincoln's birth and childhood, Mr. Dixon speaks of him as "The Boy," which is a delightful conceit. But in the remainder of the book he has his characters, from Lincoln down to the negro servants, address each other as "boy," which takes all force and originality from the conception of Lincoln as "The Boy," and becomes exceedingly tiresome.

In another part of the book Mr. Dixon makes the statement:

Both Lincoln and Davis were Southerners, born in the same State and reared in precisely the same school of thought and social usage.

There could not be a wider difference than existed between the upbringing of the two Presidents. Jefferson Davis was an aristocrat of the aristocrats, the owner of many slaves; while Lincoln, first a backwoodsman and later a country lawyer, was raised as a "poor white." The poles are not more opposite than those two distinctions in the South.

Another historical discrepancy occurs when Mr. Dixon has Lincoln ask his wife, Mrs. Lincoln, when visiting McClellan's vast camp, "Do you know what this is?" "It is the Army of the Potomac." "So it is called," responded the President, "but that is a mistake; it is only McClellan's bodyguard." The person with him was the Hon. O. M. Hatch of Illinois, and not Mrs. Lincoln.

Mr. Dixon also makes the novel assertion that Mrs. Lincoln hated the South; whereas, it is a well known and established fact that that unhappy lady allowed her sympathies for the "Cause" to lead her into many indiscretions, which but added another burden to the load her noble husband was bearing so patiently throughout those dark, agonizing days.

Mr. Dixon also uses numerous expressions in "The Southerner" which are not contemporaneous, such as "I'm in time, all right"; "He's easy."

On Page 536 he makes Lincoln use bad English in a dispatch to Gen. William T. Sherman. Lincoln, whose public documents are masterpieces of rhetoric! The blunder could have been avoided if Mr. Dixon had taken the trouble to quote the dispatch as it is published in Nicolay and Hay's history. Lincoln wrote it in the third person throughout, but Mr. Dixon altered the phraseology in the middle of the dispatch as well as the tense.

There are other discrepancies between

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fact and fiction too long to discuss in this valued paper. It is to be regretted that Mr. Dixon, who has written a fine dramatic novel, should ever have asserted that it has no historical blemishes.
NANCY TREVOR.
Washington, Aug. 21.

"The Belgian Shakespeare"

New York Times Review of Books:

THE BOOK REVIEW, in a recent issue, quotes an article from the French journal, *La Revue*, written by Max Nordau, in which its writer somewhat vehemently disputes the claim put forward by the Germans to the discovery of "the Belgian Shakespeare," Maetzelinck. And he proudly asserts that it was the French, and no other, who were responsible for the discovery. As Nordau, in his "Degeneration," was the first—and only one—among the critics to fasten the opprobrious titles of degenerates and pervert to the name of this very man, asserting that he was on the very threshold of insanity and his writings a menace to the unwary reader, isn't it a bit curious to find him now contending so vigorously with the Germans for the honor of the discovery of what which is anything but salutary or pleasing? Has he changed his mind since he penned those terrible words?
HAROLD BERMAN.
Jersey City, N. J., Aug. 20.

Miss Glasgow's "Virginia"

New York Times Review of Books:

THE CONTRIBUTION of Mr. Hundley about "Virginia" in a recent number of *The Times Book Review* aroused me to a defense of Oliver. Mr. Hundley's viewpoint reminds me very much of Gabriel Pendleton, passionate, idealistic, blind. Mr. Pendleton was unable to understand his son-in-law or any other manifestations of the modern spirit. Oliver, a man of the twentieth century, and better than many, was devotedly attached to Virginia when he married her. Everything that she did tended to estrange them. She let herself go physically, when it would have been far better for him to have shouldered some of the heavy work. She was attracted in the pettiness of household details, when she might have gone out more and gotten fresh ideas and interests. She mauled her children so that it is a won-

der they turned out as well as they did. She humored Oliver so that by degrees she turned him from a considerate husband into a pig. If you insist upon making a doorman of yourself, people will soon begin to wipe their feet on you. When prosperity finally came to the Oliver Treadwells, Virginia still refused to come to New York, to practice the arts of rejuvenation or to catch the spirit of the world in which her husband lived. Life must have been a "hell" for him, for she had stood still while the world moved on. She was not physically attractive and could offer him no mental companionship. If he tried to escape as a brute and a cad, it was her fault, because she had taught him to abuse her. We feel sorry for Virginia, but we also feel an inclination to shake her till her bones rattle. Whatever there was in Oliver, Virginia brought it out by her ridiculous self-effacement. I feel that the hero of Miss Glasgow's novel is really a fine fellow spoiled by too much humoring.

J. C. LONG.
Brooklyn, N. Y., Aug. 20.

New York Times Review of Books:

HAVING read with interest in a recent number of *THE TIMES* Book Review Mr. Hundley's remarks concerning Miss Glasgow's portrayal of the brute husband in *Virginia* as opposed to Mrs. Tyler's description of the husband as a cavalier in "The Daughter of a Rebel," and noticing that Mr. Hundley believes the latter to be more correct, these thoughts occur to me.

Since thinking it over I have my doubts. One has only to recall the Beatty trial to at once discredit Mr. Hundley's assertion that "however defective a Virginian may be in other matters, when it comes to being a husband he is pretty apt to square his shoulders and stand pat." Did Beatty stand pat? Not by any means. His trial proved him first to have been an abominable, cruel husband, and, second, the most atrocious wife murderer of recent times. Beatty was a Virginian of the representative middle class, and while his case is, of course, an extraordinary one, it might go far to prove that Miss Glasgow and not Mrs. Tyler has hit nearer the mark when she describes her Virginia hero as an indifferent and neglectful husband.

D. R.
Brooklyn, Aug. 19.

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