A Note of Confession

Shorter Novels of Herman Melville. With an Introduction by Raymond Weaver. Horace Liveright. $3.50.

I HAVE a confession to make. When, a dozen years ago, I wrote for a learned work an account of Herman Melville and compiled the first extended bibliography of his writings, I outrageously neglected his “Piazza Tales,” which I then called “not markedly original.” This was not because I had not read them, but because, I suppose, I had read them with some kind of critical blind spot in my eyes. It does not comfort me to realize that Raymond Weaver, to whom I suggested that he write the biography of Melville, seems to have read these tales with eyes hardly more alert than mine. He said that Benito Cereno and The Encantadas “show the last glow of Melville’s literary glamour.” He said of Billy Budd, which he discovered in manuscript and which I had had no chance to read, that it was “not distinguished.” We—do I seem to be confessing for Mr. Weaver too?—left it for Michael Sadler and John Freeman, both in England, to do justice to masterpieces which nobody who had even glanced at them can ever have had an excuse for overlooking.

Now, however, Mr. Weaver has atoned for his error by bringing together Benito Cereno, Bartleby the Scrivener, and The Encantadas from the “Piazza Tales” and Billy Budd from its place in the limited edition of Melville issued recently in London. Thus for the first time in America since 1856 the “Piazza Tales” (at least, three of its six titles) is recovered from the dust of the first edition; and for the first time Billy Budd, left unpublished for a generation, is issued in the United States. That such merit should have been obscured so long is one of the shocking incidents in the history of American literature.

For these shorter novels of Melville belong, whatever may formerly have been said about them, with the most original and distinguished fiction yet produced on this continent. Perhaps Bartleby the Scrivener is a little thinner than the others, a little touched with the dry pallor of the fifties. Perhaps The Encantadas drifts rather than marches in its construction, quickening in one episode and then settling back again to a different tempo. But Benito Cereno, to use a more or less unavoidable standard of measurement, equals the best of Conrad in the weight of its drama and the skill of its unfolding. And Billy Budd surpasses the best of Conrad in the music of its language, as in the profundity and serenity of its reflections.

Billy Budd is particularly important among the works of Melville because in it alone he rises above the dark problems which tormented the later years of his life. No longer asking himself, of course vainly, why evil should exist, he asks instead how it moves on its horrid errands and what is to be done about it. Or rather, he answers by telling the story of Billy Budd, a handsome sailor who is hated by a petty officer on the ship, is unjustly accused to the captain, in a burst of worthy indignation strikes the petty officer and unintentionally kills him, and has to be hanged for his offense though the captain believes the sailor to be essentially without guilt. Hardly anywhere in fiction is there a more penetrating representation of native malice than in Melville’s account of how Claggart comes to hate Billy for his beauty and his innocence. The processes of Iago are superficial in comparison. Seldom in fiction has any character been so powerfully and lucidly exhibited in any such moral plight as that of Captain Vere, faced with a plain duty and a conscience plainly urging him not to do it. And neither of these parts of the story is so memorable as the scene, at once terrible and exalted, in which Billy, innocent of everything but innocence and manslaughter, is hanged, the victim of his own victim, and as Billy was innocent, victim. Innumerable implications of the plot are broodingly revealed. Wisdom surrounds it as the water surrounds the ship. But the narrative has none of the dispersion, as of light in a prism, which often goes with wisdom. In this last story Melville wrote he thought of all he had ever thought, and yet moved forward through it with the tense, straight line of art.

CARL VAN DOREN

The Origins of the World War


The appearance of Professor Fay’s long-awaited work on the origins of the Great War means simply this: that the controversial stage in the question of war origins has been pretty well passed and that the problem has at last been examined as a whole by a professional historian of international standing whose impartiality is beyond cavil. Few books have ever been awaited with so much interest and impatience by the profession, for the author took high rank as a writer on the subject some eight years ago when he first exploded the myth of Germany’s sole responsibility in the American Historical Review, and it has been generally felt that his detailed exposition of the problem and his reasoned opinions would go a long way toward clearing up the controversial points and supplying an authoritative statement. The feeling was fully justified, for here is no attempt to prove the responsibility of this or that individual, of this or that nation. Professor Fay has spent years in careful investigation, there is almost nothing in the way of source material in any language that he has not seen and weighed, and his account is written with the same cool detachment with which he might have written of the origins of the Seven Years’ War. The book marks a veritable epoch in the discussion of the greatest controversy and the most important problem of our time. It is a monument to American scholarship which will stand as the first purely scientific treatment of the question based upon adequate source material.

Professor Fay reminds us, in his concluding chapter, of Napoleon’s famous dictum that over-simplification is the enemy of precision. He himself has made no attempt to reduce an extremely complicated problem to a few superficial formulas, and it would be ridiculous for a reviewer to essay a brief summary of the wealth of material in this book. You have here two substantial volumes, the first dealing with the underlying causes of the war and the history of international relations prior to June 28, 1914. To the student of diplomatic history this is, perhaps, the most impressive part, for it is nothing less than a series of monographic studies covering the whole period from 1870 to 1914, many of them touching upon subjects which have never before been systematically investigated, but all of them well-knit into a coherent story. As of greatest importance the reviewer would single out the treatment of the Anglo-French military and naval conversations, the exposition of Russia’s policy in the Straits question, and the general account of the Balkan situation in the period following the Balkan Wars. Professor Fay shows clearly how England gradually drifted into what Churchill rightly describes as a “moral obligation” to France from which she could not extricate herself in 1914;