

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

DEAD OR ALIVE

By Theodore Maynard

IT ought to be a salutary reminder of mortality to every famous personage to know that every well-regulated periodical has his biography prepared against the day of his death. Those winding-sheets of paper lie neatly folded in their pigeonholes ready for instant use. A man is valued according to the amount of copy that is written about him. Generally the biographer will allow a decent interval to elapse; but so great is our human curiosity that we grow impatient at times and seek to catch our celebrity dead or alive. There is a price upon his head.

Of two recent books of personal criticism, that written by Horace G. Hutchinson follows the older method of allowing a fair interim be-

tween the death and the discussion of his subject; that written by E. T. Raymond frankly professes to concern itself only with such people as are of present public interest. Many of his people, of course, will not be remembered very long; but they are being talked about now. Consequently Mr. Raymond is willing to barter any two birds of permanence in the bush for the piquant bird he has in his hand.

Mr. Hutchinson's collection of studies "Portraits of the Eighties" is the acknowledged sequel to G. W. E. Russell's "Portraits of the Seventies", just as that volume was the acknowledged sequel to Justin McCarthy's "Portraits of the Sixties". And Mr. Hutchinson is able to emphasize the continuity of the series by beginning with a chapter on Mr. Russell, in imitation of Mr. Russell himself who began his book by a portrait of his fore-runner, Mr. McCarthy.

A certain amount of overlapping is inevitable. Gladstone and Disraeli, Chamberlain and Parnell, among others, reappear several times; and the latest gleaner in the field has found that former harvesters have thinned it considerably. Nevertheless, I cannot feel that Mr. Hutchinson would have done much better under far more favorable circumstances. He is sensible and he has taken pains. But he lacks the charm of Russell or McCarthy; and he writes (or gives the reader the impression of writing) from the *outside* of his subject, whereas his fellow biographers wrote with evident *inside* information. Mr. Russell was always exquisitely discreet. He managed the difficult trick of being confidential without breaking confidences. But Mr. Hutchinson, though he announces his desire not to "administer shocks to persons still alive", has, I suspect, very little shocking material at his command.

I would not go so far as to say that "Portraits of the Eighties" are daubs. They are pleasing designs in the conventional style quite competently executed. The book is full of important facts brought together in an accessible form. But Mr. Hutchinson has little penetration and suffers in any comparison that is drawn between his work, which may be admitted to be good, and the work which is entitled to be called excellent of some recent writers.

To take a definite point at which it may be compared with the most brilliant of contemporary biographers, Lytton Strachey, let us select the Gordon of "The Eighties" and the Gordon of "Eminent Victorians". In Mr. Strachey's hands the strangest of all evangelicals, with his open Bible and his open handy bottle, becomes vividly alive. And the combined hesi-

tation and intrigue by means of which Gordon was sent to his death are unraveled with the most masterly irony. Mr. Hutchinson, however, in touching the same theme, fumbles. On page 89 he tells us, correctly enough, that Gordon, being the man he was, believed that a special intervention of Providence would occur. "It is quite impossible", he adds, "to think that the British Government believed it; nevertheless it sent him out." But ten pages later he weakly admits, "After all it is not wholly impossible that there were those in the Cabinet who believed that Gordon might be granted a peculiar portion of the divine help." Now this is not ordinary inconsistency—which is a perfectly pardonable thing. It is helpless wavering on the very centre of his argument, and serves not to illuminate Gordon or Gladstone or Hartington or Cromer but merely to show that Mr. Hutchinson is incapable of making up his mind.

If the author of "Portraits of the Eighties" is afraid of conclusions and generalizations, the author of "All and Sundry" is afraid of neither. The only fear he betrays is the fear of being dull. The only model he follows is that set up in his earlier "Uncensored Celebrities". He is at all times original, even to the degree of whimsicality; and he makes his effects by means of paradox and epigrams. Mr. Raymond's desire to be striking may have its disadvantages; it hardly leads, for instance, to historical impartiality; but it enables him to make everything he touches intensely interesting.

I have said that E. T. Raymond is "original". So he is in the mode of presenting his theme. Apart from his amusing literary tricks, however, there is not much in what he has to

say. His philosophy is derived from Carlyle, his wit is on the Chesterton model, and his information is culled from the newspapers. These elements are fused together into an alloy that at first glance appears to be a new metal. There is no reason why we should examine it more closely.

Mr. Raymond is delicately impudent in his sketches of "All and Sundry"; and it is this light irreverence that is his chief attraction. He never says a really bitter thing, even where he should say it; but on the other hand he never stints his banter. Nobody could be offended or fail to be entertained by it—not even those who squirm under it; for Raymond's humor is invariably good-humored.

I can best illustrate his method by examples. Dean Inge's face, he says, is that "of a quiet fanatic whose main trouble is that he has nothing very obvious to be fanatical about". And Herbert Samuel "moves towards his object with a sort of inexorable gentleness, as of a Juggernaut car fitted with pneumatic tyres". Comments in the same vein are offered upon President Wilson, Rudyard Kipling (the one man of his group Mr. Raymond comes nearest to disliking), Conan Doyle, Harold Begbie, and T. P. O'Connor. Unqualified or almost unqualified praise is reserved for the two Frenchmen in "All and Sundry", Clemenceau and Foch. But whether in praise or persiflage the book is highly readable.

It is a pity that Neville Chamberlain was not included as one of Mr. Raymond's subjects. A good deal of fun could have been extracted out of the widely advertised and inefficient Minister of National Service. I cannot refrain from retailing a mot that a man I knew went round repeating in the London clubs. It seems to me to

sum up bureaucratic futility. "Neville Chamberlain", he was wont to say gravely, "may take a long time before he is able to make the wrong decision—but he makes it in the end!"

Portraits of the Eighties. By Horace G. Hutchinson. Charles Scribner's Sons.
All and Sundry. By E. T. Raymond. Henry Holt and Co.