

Reviews and Notices

The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln. By CLAUDE G. BOWERS. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1929. Pp. xxii+567. Illustrated, \$5.00.

Books on special periods of American party history have come rapidly from the pen of Mr. Bowers in recent years. First, *Party Battles of the Jackson Period* (1922), then, *Jefferson and Hamilton* (1925), and now *The Tragic Era*. Of his purpose in writing the new volume, the author says: "I have sought to recreate the black and bloody drama of these years [1865-1877], to show the leaders of the fighting factions at close range, to picture the moving masses, both whites and blacks, in North and South, surging crazily under the influence of the poisonous propaganda on which they were fed." He sticks to his purpose and performs his task with spirit and evident enjoyment. Events stand out with dramatic clearness, and characters are made to live before their readers.

The narrative starts with the death of Lincoln and the accession of Johnson in a chapter headed, "The King is Dead; Long Live the King." The story closes with the Hayes-Tilden election dispute and the end of the carpet-bag régime. The last chapter is entitled, "The Crowning Crime—and Release." The entire volume is written in a "style that haunts". The reader is given many a chance to look behind the scenes. Some men are painted blacker than ever before, and perhaps some, like Andrew Johnson, whiter. The stirring scenes and dramatic episodes of the period are seized on and presented with force and skill. Opinions are freely expressed. Of the congressional campaign of 1866, Bowers says: "The Johnsonians sought through serious constitutional arguments to reach the minds of the voters; the Radicals were concerned solely with their passions." Of Senator Oliver P. Morton, he writes: "He wanted nothing on his sword but blood, and that he seldom failed to draw. In his more savage moments—and he was never gentle—he had no patience with the sword—he grasped a battle-axe." Again: "The election of 1872 was a sweeping triumph for reaction; and the South

found itself in more dire straits than ever, as the corruptionists and carpetbaggers, triumphant, mounted and rode."

An unprejudiced reader of the pages of Bowers must agree with most of his conclusions. His interpretations of the party activities of the period are, in the main correct. He deserves credit for his courage in setting forth the ugly truth. He should be praised, likewise, for looking into many and scattered sources for information. In short, he comes close to being an able historian. He is safe enough for critical and widely-read students of history, who are themselves accustomed to handling the sources. These can gather the facts from his narrative, guard themselves against the persuasive influence of his rhetoric, and modify his conclusions when it seems necessary. At the same time, they can not escape the conviction that a more restrained style, more *pro* and *con* in the discussion of problems and men, and fewer unqualified opinions would vastly improve the works of this near-brilliant author.

It may be argued that Mr. Bowers does not write for the sake of trained historical students, but for a vastly larger class of people who have not been in the habit of reading history. The answer is that it is these very readers who have no protection against writers of the school of Mr. Bowers. They are not critical. They have little knowledge of the sources. They do not distinguish between fact and fiction. They read what appeals to them. They read for enjoyment and the information acquired is incidental. No period, not even the "Tragic Era" is altogether one of thrills. Even drama is not made up of climaxes in rapid succession. Most actors on the stage of history are gray, rather than black or white. In an era of excitement, selfishness and corruption, there are always some extenuating circumstances. Much that was unsavory in the politics of the period following the Civil War was perfectly natural. The currents of the time ran true to form, as they tend to do in every country, under similar conditions, without reference to what parties or leaders may be in the ascendancy. All three of the volumes of Mr. Bowers would be much sounder, live longer and do less harm, had he understood that it is not so much the business of the historian to blame and praise, as to explain political leaders. Neither is it the chief business of the historian to drive his own interpretations into the

minds of his readers with the most forceful English that he can command, but instead to present the truth clearly leaving his readers free to form their own conclusions in the presence of the evidence impartially stated. Within these limits, an engaging style should not be despised but welcomed.

The Literary Guild of America has chosen *The Tragic Era* for distribution to its members, as one of twelve books selected for the present year. This is a tribute to the powers of Mr. Bowers as a writer in the field of political history which can not be ignored. An earlier selection of the Guild was Woodward's *Meet General Grant*. The choice of these volumes by the keen-minded Carl Van Doren and his associates carries a heavy responsibility. It seems to imply that these intellectual leaders, who have assumed the task of educating the tastes of cultivated readers, prefer books in the field of history that have high literary quality. They must of course, understand the desirability of unbiased accounts, balanced narratives, and presentations of truth for its own sake, but evidently these seemingly indispensable qualities of historical writing have been considered as secondary.

WILLIAM O. LYNCH.

William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina (xxvii+341 pp.) has recently been published by The North Carolina Historical Commission (Raleigh). The work was prepared for the Commission by Professor William K. Boyd of Duke University, who furnishes a valuable Introduction of seventeen pages, and accompanies the text of the document with ample notes. The volume is supplied with an adequate index. The last several pages of the Introduction are devoted to the life and characteristics of William Byrd. The book is attractively printed and bound. Students of the colonial period of American history are placed under great obligations to Professor Boyd and the North Carolina Commission.

The State Department of History of South Dakota has brought out a fourteenth volume of the *Historical Collections* of that State. The new volume is one of 590 pp. In addition there are ten supplementary pages consisting of "Administrative and Protective Regulations", being Part 21 of the South