Book Reviews

*Jefferson and the Press.* By Frank L. Mott. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943, pp. 65. $1.00.)

The arrival of each "book review section" carries its weekly reminders of the almost frantic search currently being made for roots firm enough to hold in a rising wind. The literary result has been as varied as reminiscences retelling the positiveness of grandfather's day, the teachings of Apostle Paul in fictional form, and biographies of earlier American leaders. Unfortunately the scholarship has not always been equal to the subject. But when the dean of historians of American journalism sets out to explore the attitude of the "father" of American democracy toward freedom of the press, the result is this satisfying little volume.

Jefferson believed that the press had an essential role in the democratic system to keep the electorate informed and to exercise a disciplinary influence on the public functionaries. But the newspapers could perform that work, he insisted, only so long as they remained free. Press freedom, as he remarked on one occasion, "guards our other liberties." The only limitation he would permit was a cautious use of libel laws to prevent liberty from becoming license. To these basic principles he remained consistently loyal to the end of his life, despite the nature of the attacks levied upon him by the dominant Federalist press. Such was his position in time, place, and influence that he had an extraordinary opportunity to fix them in the American system.

He sponsored the adoption of these principles in the constitution of his own state of Virginia; and when the federal constitution omitted specific guarantees of freedom of the press, he protested vigorously from his position across the ocean. The argument that such guarantees were redundant for a government of delegated powers left him unconvinced, and he continued to press for a bill of rights that would speak out "clearly and without the aid of sophism." Time and the number of Supreme Court decisions, citing the first ten amendments have proved him right.

With the rise of political parties, the press which he had done so much to nurture became a major enemy. Concentrated in the populous centers and being men of wealth and business, the Federalists controlled four-fifths of the
papers at the time Jefferson was elected vice-president. Scared by the leveling forces that were daily becoming more evident and convinced that Jefferson was calling up these forces to serve his own demagogic purposes, they lashed him with the vehemence of the threatened. His attempts to counter their influence by encouraging the founding of Republican papers met with only limited success, in part because his choice of editor was sometimes not of the best. He found firmer ground in his determined opposition to the Sedition Act and eventually won the presidency with the aid of that issue.

Though the Jeffersonian Republicans captured the seat of government in 1801, the Federalists continued for some time to be a majority on the editorial page. As their sense of frustration mounted with each more decisive defeat at the polls, they waxed more and more bitter, reaching a level of scurrility in their personal attacks on Jefferson which Mott believes has never been equaled in American annals. These years constituted the real test of Jefferson's loyalty to the principles of a free press, and he withstood his trial by canard with unchanging ideals. Private letters, however, reveal that he writhed painfully under the newspaper attacks, turning repeatedly to Plato, Horace, and Tacitus for refuge. It was not until after he had ceased to be President that the rise of western municipalities created a Republican press equal to that of the Federalists.

Author and publisher are to be complimented for their restraint in limiting the size of the book to the subject, even though that meant a volume of only sixty-five pages. The value of this study would have been enhanced, however, by one addition—that of a selected bibliography.

Cedric Cummins

*George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the Old South.* By Harvey Wish. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943, pp. ix, 360. §3.00.)

Who spoke for the slaveholding South, to defend human bondage, repudiate the social compact and free contract from Locke to Jefferson, and denounce industrial capitalism? George Fitzhugh, a kindly man whose only formal education was reading for the law, a Virginian who caricatured the North without ever travelling outside the Old Dominion ex-