

Extract from
Observer, London

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Vol II

INTIMACIES

The Journals of André Gide, Volume II, 1914-1927. (Secker and Warburg. 30s.)

By ALAN MOOREHEAD

THOSE who have already succumbed to the fascination of these journals are not likely to be disappointed in this second volume, which has now been ably, even brilliantly, translated and annotated by Professor Justin O'Brien.

The new book covers the period from the beginning of the first World War to the safe years of the late twenties. It is the period of Gide's middle age, from his forty-fifth to his fifty-eighth year, when he was obsessed by his long and tortured struggle to find a faith.

No one, as Gide himself admits, can ever tell the whole truth in an intimate diary, still less if he knows that he is going to edit and publish what he writes. To take the human heart through all its despairs and doubts and joys, not to withhold anything, never to tell a lie: this is something which must baulk the most sensitive and uninhibited spirit. And yet Gide comes near it.

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At the end of these 427 pages one really does feel that one has seen all round him, as it were; one knows the direction and rhythms of all his moods so well that one could make a fairly accurate guess at just how he would react if he were suddenly put down, say, in a Central African swamp or the House of Commons. The book gives the reader the feeling that he is living with it and growing up with it, and since this is a first-class mind, determined to display itself entirely, the effect is passionately true. It has that confused and eerie quality of truth which one associates with hearing someone talking in his sleep or confessing to a psychiatrist in a darkened room.

It is a book to quote from endlessly; his analysis of Freud (that "imbecile of genius"), his pictures of Proust, his absurd meeting with Edmund Gosse at the Crillon in Paris, his comment on such phenomena as the cleanliness of Switzerland ("this is just what she lacks: manure").

But perhaps the following extract gives as well as anything the flavour of this pungent melancholy mind:

I believe the truth lies in youth . . . but I believe often when trying to protect youth we impede it. I believe that each new generation

arrives bearing a message that it must deliver; our role is to help that delivery. I believe that what is called "experience" is often but an unavowed fatigue, resignation, blighted hope. I believe to be true, tragically true, this remark of Alfred de Vigny, often quoted, which seems simple only to those who quote it without understanding it: "A fine life is a thought conceived in youth and realised in maturity." . . . There are very few of my contemporaries who have remained faithful to their youth. They have almost all compromised. That is what they call "learning from life." They have denied the truth that was in them.

And so on, page after page. Where the book drags (and drag it does occasionally in some sections) a sudden, brilliantly original thought leaps out, a description of a dying peasant woman or a scene at a street corner that rings with life.

Beyond all this, one has a picture of the incessant, never-ending work which feeds a really cultivated mind. Two hours' practice on the piano, an hour writing letters, two hours on translations, five hours on a novel, and every other spare minute (apart from a short walk in the country) given up to reading. This is how the days of Gide's middle age went by.

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One feels throughout the pressure of his peculiar brand of defiant protestantism and the besetting fevers of his physical abnormality. So it is, in a sense, the book of a man who is forever in a minority, forever on the outside looking in. And certainly it is none the worse for that.

There are disappointing gaps. His English visit, for example, is passed over almost in silence, while he writes so well of his other journeys in Turkey, Switzerland, Africa, and France itself. One would have liked to have heard his reaction to the ending of the 1914-1918 war. And there is little or no reference to politics or painting.

But it is a monumental confession of an erudite, conscientious, modest and tormented mind, perhaps one of the best contemporary minds (if not the most attractive) expressing itself at its highest level. There is hardly one of Professor O'Brien's footnotes that is not well worth reading.