

English Frenchman

By CAMPBELL NAIRNE

FLAUBERT was once asked what sort of reputation would please him most. "That of a corrupter of morals," he snapped. André Gide is said to quote that story with relish, and one can understand why; he, too, has been called a *démoralisateur*. It seems incredible to us that *Madame Bovary* could have led to the public prosecution of Flaubert on a charge of immorality. Fifty or a hundred years hence it may seem equally incredible that a contemporary critic could brand Gide's work as "the most flagrantly unpunished intellectual and moral scandal of the century."

The ordinary man, now at last becoming aware of Gide as a major figure in European letters—perhaps the most important figure of his generation—may well wonder what all the potter was about. There is an entry in his diary under the date June 3, 1924:

I intend to give to those who read me strength, joy, courage, defiance and perspicacity—but I am above all careful not to give them directions, judging that they can and must find them by themselves—I was about to say "in themselves."

In pursuing his aim he has sometimes expounded dangerous philosophies and ventured to report on regions of human experience which society prefers to leave unexplored. But his fault—if fault there was—lay in assuming that his readers had minds as adult as his own. Behind everything he has written is a moral earnestness that makes nonsense of the accusations that have been levelled at him.

WELL, it's an old story now, and to-day the hostile voices are all but silent. The Nobel award has come to crown a lifetime of literary endeavour and if not "respectable" he is at least respected—except perhaps in Russia, where the Communists have never forgiven him for espousing and then rejecting their creed.

Compared with Proust, Duhamel, Romains, Roger Martin du Gard and other writers of his period he is little known on this side of the Channel—a curious irony, for he owes more than any of them to the masters of English literature and has repeatedly turned aside from his own creative work to engage in the thankless task of translation. His translations of Shakespeare, Whitman, Tagore and Conrad would alone justify the honorary doctorate that Oxford conferred on him last year.

He is often spoken of as a novelist, but he himself considers that he has written only one novel (*The Counterfeiters*) and prefers to describe his other works of fiction as tales or satires. He has always been an acute self-critic and no doubt he realizes that he is lacking in the qualities that the true novelist must possess. The curiosity

he displays about other people is not the curiosity of the novelist. His goal is self-identification. That is implicit in one of the reflections he confides to his diary: "The best means of learning to know oneself is seeking to understand others."

A description of Gide as he was sixty years ago—he is now seventy-nine—gives us a picture of "a thin, tall, pale young man with a black beard, brown cloak, black felt hat, and in his hand a copy of the Scriptures." That last touch is important; he has been a lifelong student of the Bible and much of his work is an illumination of its truths.

It is impossible to understand Gide without taking into account his Huguenot heritage. He revolted against it when a physical adventure in North Africa—the great emotional and moral crisis of his life—revealed to him that the asceticism of his youth was standing in the way of self-realization; but he has never been able to escape from it long. Hence the perpetual inner conflict which is the mainspring of his writing.

HIS latest biographer, Klaus Mann, son of the famous novelist, Thomas Mann, has been in close touch with him for more than twenty years, and his *André Gide* (Dennis Dobson, 15s.) can be recommended as a sympathetic study of his life and art. By a happy chance its appearance coincides with that of the second volume of *The Journals of André Gide* in the American translation by Justin O'Brien (Secker and Warburg, 30s.). To Klaus Mann Gide's diary is "a treasure of a book, not inferior to Montaigne's *Essays* or to Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*." That is the judgment of an enthusiast; he text hardly supports it.

Yet in spite of its occasional flatness and triviality, this second volume, covering the years 1914 to 1927, does give the reader a feeling of direct contact with an exceptionally interesting human being. There are dozens of arresting observations on books and writing and some unexpected sidelights on literary figures: an account of a luncheon in Paris at which Edmund Gosse made a fool of himself, a report of an astonishing conversation with Paul Valéry ("People expect me to represent French poetry. They take me for a poet. But I don't give a damn about poetry. . .").

Gide will never be a popular author. His promethean intellect moves in air too rarefied and there is much in his physical and spiritual make-up that huts him out from the comprehension of ordinary men. But his influence is a fertilizing force in life and literature as been immense and seems likely to grow.