BOOK REVIEWS


For readers who subscribe to Bacon's contention that some books are to be tasted and a few chewed and digested, and prefer the latter kind, Virginia Lewis' Russell Smith, Romantic Realist will provide the perfect fare. The latest of many distinguished publications by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Miss Lewis' interpretation of the life and work of this nineteenth century painter to whom both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia may lay claim is a 350 page volume studded from Introduction to Selected Bibliography with rich material to intrigue professional and amateur historians and art enthusiasts alike.

The sipper and the sampler may find the threads of the book too interwoven and embellished for swift, easy biographical reading, for Miss Lewis, after the manner of real scholars, cannot resist the desire to enrich the backdrop against which she projects Russell Smith's life with excursions into the historical and cultural settings of his day. If for some these details are sidelights that seem to clutter the artist's life story, for others they will be highlights recreating vividly the cities and the theatres in which Russell Smith worked and the friends—artists, actors, scientists, writers—with whom he associated, And this highly documented recreation of the nineteenth century is essential to the author's thesis that Russell Smith "... represents an important part of the whole pattern of American culture" and that "... he does reveal distinctively, in his work and in his personality, the character of his time." She does not claim for him artistic greatness—"... he is not an artist of major proportions." But she does see him as both a reflector and a reflection of the century and the regions in which he lived. And so the details of years of research are introduced that not only Russell Smith, the artist, will live again for the reader, but that the age of Russell Smith, nineteenth century gentleman of many talents and intellectual interests, may live again. Thus through Russell Smith—his life and his paintings—one glimpses Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Washington with the physical and cultural characteristics peculiar to each. One meets his friends—the scientists William and Henry Rogers, Benjamin Silliman, and Sir Charles Lyell, the artists John Sartain, Thomas Sully, Rembrandt Peale and Joshua Shaw, the theatre greats Fanny Kemble,
Edwin Booth, Louisa Drew, and Charlotte Cushman. Russell Smith does indeed "...provide an interesting glimpse into nineteenth century America."

Because of its wealth of background material and because of the versatility of its central figure, the book will appeal to many readers in special ways. The Western Pennsylvania will take particular delight in the candid, homespun descriptions in Russell Smith's journal of this region and will come upon references to many a familiar landmark—Fort Ligonier, Old Allegheny, Lawrenceville—and many a familiar name—Holmes, Bakewell, Schoenberger, Page, Biddle. Numerous pictorial recordings—sketches, water colors, oils—that Russell Smith made of Pittsburgh are reproduced in the book to further prompt nostalgic reminiscing—the Powder Magazine at Fort Duquesne, old Western University of Pennsylvania at Third Avenue and Cherry Alley, the oldest house at the foot of Coal Hill opposite Market Street, views of Ormsby's farm opposite Bakewell's Glass Works, the Salt Works on Saw Mill Run, the Aqueduct, Nelson's Island showing Monument Hill, the Blockhouse as the residence of Isaac Craig. Those interested primarily in Russell Smith as an artist, however, will find not only the 62 collotypes of his work refreshingly stimulating and appealing, but will derive much satisfaction from Miss Lewis' restrained, lucid, and scholarly evaluation and interpretation of them and other examples of his work.

The theatre-goer will be especially fascinated by excerpts from Russell Smith's journal and from newspaper clippings and theatre programs that reveal his work as a scene painter and give us tantalizing views of productions and prominent theatre personalities of the nineteenth century. Interest is further enhanced by eight reproductions of Smith's sketches for drops and curtains. For many his busy life in the world of the theatre will provide delightfully entertaining reading.

But for most readers the deepest satisfactions may come from sharing vicariously in the versatile, successful, creative experiences that filled Russell Smith's long life. For his is something of an American success story—born of immigrant parents, reared in rough-hewn pioneer setting, largely self-educated and widely so, motivated by an industrious nature and a keen intellectual curiosity, rise to fame and fortune ("By all the standards of the nineteenth century he was successful," writes Miss Lewis. "In his time he was recipient of extravagant praise, some of which was directed toward him as a scene painter, some of it levied..."
upon him as an artist of the landscape.”) This over-simplifies the story of his life; however, it does suggest that his life typifies for us a rich, full one that we can admire and enjoy, an interesting one in itself and significant in providing real insight into the last century. The paradoxes of the nineteenth century characterize his work and his personality, and he reflects, in one way or another, “its diverse philosophies of romanticism and realism, its romanticism and classicism, its interest in science, and its sometime obvious and empty sentimentality.” He was vitally a part of “... an America which was just developing as a new nation with cultural achievements as well as political and military success.” In portraying Russell Smith as such, Virginia Lewis has given us a treat to be chewed, digested, and savored.

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Clocks are extraordinary things, including somewhat of the philosophy, the history and the mechanics which all go to make up our concept of time.

Like its subject, *Pennsylvania Clocks and Clockmakers* includes a little of all three. And despite a few errors, some faults and many omissions, it is a good book.

The errors mostly occur where Mr. Eckhardt, a prominent and veteran clockman, mentions something that isn’t so, but seems too certain to have needed checking; such as: “Brownsville, formerly known as Red Stone Old Fort, is in Redstone Township.” They are mostly of a minor nature.

Principal faults are digressions, such as the inclusion of a new translation of the “Horologium,” by Huygens, and the chapter on William Molyneux’ determination of sidereal time; both these, while interesting and valuable, are really outside the announced purview of the work.

Even the most captious critic can hardly complain of the omissions, since Mr. Eckhardt has brought together so much valuable and hitherto unavailable material on his subject. They are principally in the great lists of clockmasters, which are among the most valuable things in the book.