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## Fact Into Fiction

**NEW ORLEANS WOMAN: A Biographical Novel of Myra Clark Gaines.** By Harnett Kane. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1946. 384 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JAMES P. WOOD

**M**YRA CLARK GAINES, whose legal battle with the city of New Orleans brought her national attention during her lifetime, has already been returned to public notice this year. The obstinate litigant and her story are the subject of "The Famous Case of Myra Clark Gaines," by Nolan B. Harmon, Jr., which was published in September.

Harnett Kane's novel and the earlier study tell fundamentally the same story of the woman whose case in all its phases was before a succession of courts from 1832 to 1896, several years after Mrs. Gaines's death. "The Strange Case of Myra Clark Gaines" opened with the life story of Daniel Clark, wealthy New Orleans business man and politician. This new novel begins with his 21-year-old daughter, about to be married in Delaware, where she had been brought up as the child of Colonel Samuel B. Davis, becoming aware of her parentage and forming the belief that she had been defrauded of the great riches left by her father.

Almost immediately Myra began the fight to prove her legitimacy and her right to the vast sums involved in Daniel Clark's estate. The story is complicated by many issues and perplexing legal developments as the case moves from state to federal courts and finally to the Supreme Court of the United States, which several times ruled on the validity of points raised by Myra's claims. It is a strange story, and amazing is tough-minded, half-Creole Myra who, determined and insistent, wore out two husbands and subjected her family to hardships of many kinds as well as driving herself without relief as she pressed her case.

Myra suffered mob violence and social humiliation, legal defeats; knew social triumph, legal victories, poverty, vindication, affluence, fame, scorn, but never acknowledged defeat in her long career as a claimant. The reader watches with admiration and some awe as the personable but determined young girl becomes the energetic and commanding woman and then the aged eccentric. The novel often seems essentially the straight line of monomania drawn through the confusion of a tale involving many issues and names well known in nineteenth-century American history.

The biographical novel is always handicapped. It must use the devices and conventions of fiction but stay recognizably close to the character and life story of its subject. "New Orleans Woman" effects the compromise decently, mostly because Myra Clark Gaines was colorful and there was sufficient drama in her career. "New Orleans Woman" is not otherwise a novel of marked quality.

## Unnovel Novel

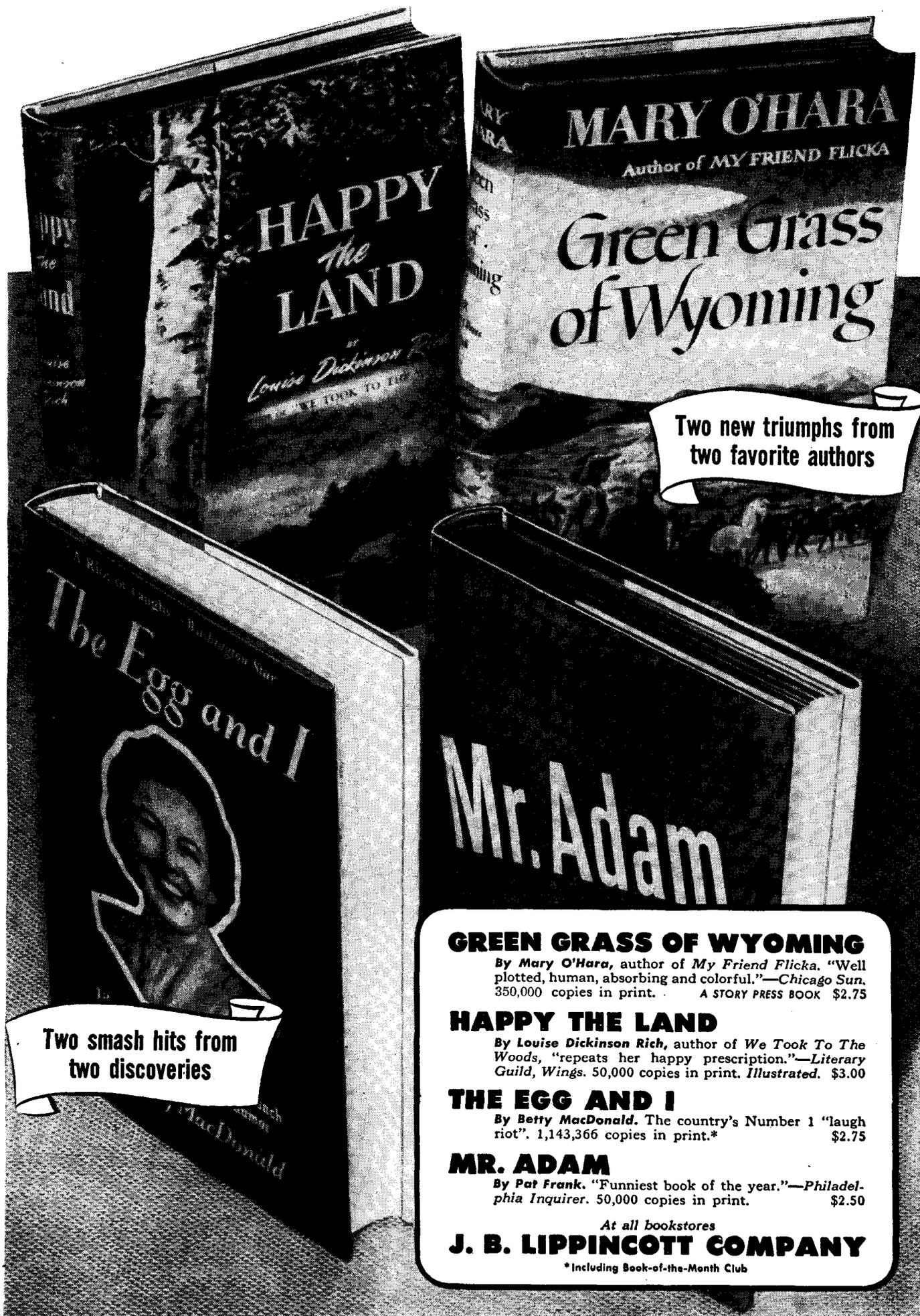
**HIDDEN SEASON.** By Robert Sturgis. New York: M. S. Mill Co. 1946. 249 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

**M**R. STURGIS'S last novel, published more than a year ago, dealt with a man's induction into the army and with his first year in uniform. It made a satisfying impression because of its deep sincerity. I have looked again at the review I wrote of it, in which I set down that, although Mr. Sturgis seemed to be feeling his way through a prose that was often unsure and amateurish, he had treated his people with naturalness and uncompromising honesty, and that it would be very interesting to see his study of the returning soldier. "Hidden Season" appears to be that study, and it is a considerable disappointment. The writing is still amateurish, too plainly so, but that could be granted as a hurdle to be gotten over; the real cause for disappointment is that Mr. Sturgis has neglected the earnestness and the logic of reality which made his earlier novel so palatable.

His book is ostensibly about a returned soldier and the problems of his readjustment to civilian life. Actually these matters are skirted altogether, with the merest mention and no attempt at treatment. It is really a routine little romance we have here, about a fellow and an actress, how they have misunderstandings and partings and reconciliations, with several minor gambits involving a pert little cousin and a lovely old aunt stationed at the center of the narrative. The presence of the returned soldier brooding about the place, and mumbling into his drinks about not knowing what he wants to do now, helps not in the least to disguise the intrinsic triviality of the story.

Mr. Sturgis may still wish to tackle that problem seriously; I hope he does, and still believe he might do a good job of it.



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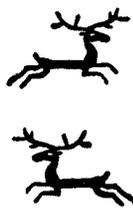
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## Good Stories About the Welsh

*THE TRIP TO LONDON.* By Rhys Davies. New York: Howell, Soskin. 1946. 214 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NANCY GROBERG CHAIKIN

**I**N a cluttered and chaotic world which is producing cluttered and chaotic literature, it is a strange and sometimes gratifying thing to see the short story writer appear, trembling, and poke a tentative, timid finger into the literary pie. For, much like the poet, he is placing the distilled beside the diluted, the crystal beside the mass, the form beside the formless. He is forced to be selective in a civilization whose most prominent men are apparently unable to select. From the vast human experience which he sifts and strains, he must produce his evasive moment, intensify his quick sensation, clarify his vital thought, and send them hurtling through to our consciousness. He offers us the portion which understands the whole, and this is an era of difficult audience, discouraging because it is too busy to accept.

Many readers should be happily surprised, therefore, to run across a writer like Rhys Davies, most of whose short stories support his publishers' glowing claims. In his brief, sometimes amusing, sometimes depressing excursions into Welsh folk life, he exhibits, indeed, a wonderful sort of

insight and "a poetic apprehension of the commonplaces of human experience." He is fluent and dexterous, sometimes ironic, sometimes downright funny. He can be mild and soft, but he can also be sharp and painful. The smooth irony of "The Benefit Concert," the delicious characterization of "The Last Struggle," the quick turn from oppressiveness to delightful relief in "River, Flow Gently," in these, in all, are testimonies to fine and unique ability. I must take issue with the dust jacket, however, which likes to think of the collection as "a brilliant display of Mr. Davies's versatility," for, it seems to me, his folksy tales come off much better than his more sophisticated ones and, even in a world dazzled by sophistication, the folk stories will probably seem more vital.

In any mood, however, Mr. Davies is rather satisfying—a keen and compassionate observer, a poet and a lover. He will be snowed under, no doubt, by ponderous novels of Civil War families, by verbose and seductive histories of remarkable women, by slick self-satisfied reports of domestic upheaval and financial success, which will sell like mad. But somehow, under the pile of soft coal, his modest little gem ought to get a ray or two through to hungry, careful eyes.

## Genealogy with a Drawl

*TIME LAY ASLEEP.* By Carman Barnes. New York: Harper & Bros. 1946. 243 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GRACE FRANK

**A** GENEALOGICAL chart should have accompanied this novel for it concerns a family of wide-ranging antecedents and descendants, a family excessively preoccupied with itself and steeped in the legends and traditions of its forbears. Most of the story revolves around a Victorian matriarch, Grandmother Wickham, and her more modern daughters: Fefie, the spinster who could not bear to leave Mama and who disciplined the others; Eve, who "believed in evil and thought sex the root of it"; Nona and Dombey, who married, divorced, bore children, and always managed, in some way or another, to have several men besides their husbands in love with them.

The author, who wrote "School-girl" when she was only fifteen and who is now the wife of Hamilton Fish Armstrong, associates herself with Nona's young daughter, Neal Mac-

Neill, and some of the story is narrated with no regard for chronological sequence by this precocious child. Neal would have us know not only every member of her huge family, living and dead, back to her various great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, but the historical, geographical, social, and economic circumstances that account for their individual lives. She also tries to reconstruct through the ramifications of her people the mores of Ross's Landing, (the old name of Chattanooga, Tennessee) from its beginnings to about the year 1925.

Obviously, much of the volume is autobiographical and obviously, too, Miss Barnes in good Southern fashion enjoyed writing these reminiscences about her kinsfolk. Unfortunately, her ambition to recreate a large family and a long period, to give a sense of time, place, and of many diverse individuals, must be regarded as more laudable than successful. The sum of the good things in this book does not add up to a really good novel.