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Review of The Leavises on Fiction: An Historic Partnership

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BOOK REVIEW

by Bill Adams

The Leavises on Fiction
An Historic Partnership

by P.J.M. Robertson

Macmillan Press £9.95 Paperback

Trying to follow the polemics of literary criticism is rather like trying to understand the progress of an aerial battle from the ground. One is aware of much noise and the incomprehensible twistings of the vapour trails of argument. However, anyone having the least interest in English literature cannot fail to have heard of the battling Leavises, or indeed, to recognise the spare features and uncompromising expressions of both spouses.

It was this vague layman's interest which led me to open Dr. Robertson's book, with the thought - how can anyone looking as pugnacious as F.R. Leavis have the delicacy of thought necessary to appreciate great literature?

The Introduction was sufficient to convince me that I must read on. It is concise and informative and leads with a clear light into the succeeding chapters. It must be said that to appreciate the latter fully one should have read the Leavises' own work, but there is guidance enough given by Dr. Robertson to make that reading a very enlightening task.

The most significant point brought out is that the Leavises were not only critics but teachers, who really cared more about laying down guide-lines for their students than scoring points off fellow critics. The battle was for better education, not personal satisfaction. Not that they always succeeded. Referring to Mrs. Leavis's work Robertson remarks

"It is as if she makes the process of dealing with a novel into a mystique in the moment of trying to clarify it. And her attitude to other critics hinders rather than helps what she says". For me, this is the cardinal sin.

Throughout his commentaries Dr. Robertson sets out in the clearest style the aims and opinions of these two great critics, without being blind to their shortcomings. Such a balanced view of the work of such a very controversial couple cannot but be helpful to any reader, student or not.