

A GREAT CRITIC AT LAST DISCOVERS W. D. HOWELLS

Van Wyck Brooks
gives impressionistic
picture of the
famous Ohioan
and his world

HOWELLS: HIS LIFE AND
WORLD by Van Wyck Brooks.
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biography.

In 1941 Van Wyck Brooks' *alter ego*, Oliver Allston, reported that he had never got around to reading William Dean Howells' novels until he was forty-five. Then, for the first time, he discovered how good they really were.

That would have been in the 1930's. Meanwhile, for years, Brooks had been a major critical force in directing a new literary generation to the belief that most American writing for a half century had been stamped with sterile Victorianism and that Howells, the eminently successful and revered leader of that era, was to be condemned as a timid, prudish escapist who insisted upon looking only at the "smiling aspects of life," and for whom the limits of printable realism stopped with what was suited to the eyes of easily blushing maidens. Since the twenties few young American critics have dared omit at least one slanting allusion to Howells' timid gentility.

In 1948, though, through the *Chilmark Miscellany*, Brooks let it be known that his views had changed. The world of Howells' novels, he said, was a revelation. It was "the real American scene, reflected in a burnished mirror, as no American eye had ever perceived it. . . . Through decade after decade Howells followed the life of the nation, and he caught so many of its phases that as a social historian he had no equal."

Recantation

Now, in *Howells: His Life and World*, Brooks gives his full and generous recan-

tation. In spite of the title, though, his new study is more of Howells' world than of the man. Brooks uses biography chiefly as a frame for his own vivid, impressionistic reconstruction of Howells' changing era from 1860 to 1920. For this, he utilized an abundance of materials gleaned largely from Howells' own long and sweeping reportage. The world that emerges is a rather quiet one. It had little of the sordid and twisted in it. There was healthy optimism, for the most part, and a natural idealism. It was balanced by a willing acceptance of the ordinary and commonplace realities where most people have to live, and where Howells himself found his surest approach to the essential truth and beauty of things. According to his philosophy, he had no right to chronicle any other world, and Brooks finds that he recorded it with courage and great capability, at the same time leading a thorough-going revolt against the falsities of a worn-out romanticism.

Beginning with Columbus when Howells was twenty-three, Brooks recreates one after another the Venice, Cambridge, New England vacation land, New York, and foreign locales that gave Howells the raw materials for his many books. The evocation is sensitive and penetrating—at its best in accounts of the Italian years, first during the Venetian consulship just after Howells left Columbus in 1861, then years later when he returned to Italy as to a spiritual homeland and found inspiration there for such fine stories as *Indian Summer*, which among his novels he called his favorite.

Brooks' book will not be used as a factual source for Howells' life. Sharp outlines of biographical detail are often

softened drastically to make just the proper frame for the impressionistic picture that Brooks is adept in creating. The opening sentence, for instance, is typical of the technique:

Living in Columbus

"Before the Civil War broke out," Brooks begins, "William Dean Howells had been living for three or four years in Columbus, Ohio, where, as a reporter attached to the State Legislature, he had his own desk in the capitol building."

Actually, young Howells had been a reporter attached to the capitol only off and on between January, 1857, and spring, 1858. From November, 1858, until March, 1860, he had been an editor on the *Ohio State Journal*. Then having been released from the *Journal* he had been employed by Follett and Foster of Columbus as a general hack writer, working especially on a campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln. And in June, 1860, when Brooks begins his story, young Howells was without a job, but with the earnings from his *Lincoln*, he was starting a trip East, the aftercourses of which were to prove momentous both for himself and for American letters. Brooks' book will supplement, but in no way replace, the basic two-volume life by Edwin H. Cady.

As usual, Brooks documents little. The six-page index is confined to names of real-life people. Students delving into the valuably discerning critical analyses will wish that it had been extended to include at least the many important references to Howells' individual books.