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The Tree Of Liberty. By Elizabeth Page.

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BOOK REVIEW

THE TREE OF LIBERTY. By Elizabeth Page. New York and Toronto: Farrar and Rinehart. 1939. Pp. 385, bibliography. \$3.00.

The following extract from a letter to the Editor from Professor Thomas Reed Powell is published with his permission and at the suggestion of the writer of the review:

"I have a suggestion that might interest you, and that is this: I read with great interest 'The Tree of Liberty' and am amazed at the accuracy with which the author reports or refers to many minor as well as major matters in the early constitutional history of Virginia. I thought that I had caught her in one mistake when she had people voting in Washington at the time of the first election of Jefferson, but a friend who looked up the matter in various histories, particularly local histories about the capital, found that the District of Columbia was not formally established until sometime shortly after Jefferson's election. I read the novel with great interest, particularly in view of my having gone carefully through Elliott's Debates on the Virginia ratifying convention before my visit with you. You might get one of your historians to write a review of it solely from the standpoint of its historical value."

Miss Page, born in Vermont and educated at Vassar with a post-graduate course in history at Columbia, became acquainted with the last American frontier of Oklahoma Territory late in the last century. Here, as a girl of eleven, she chanced upon some old letters written during the gold rush days of 1849. These appealed powerfully to her imagination which as she grew older was fertilized by reading Parkman and resulted in her first book: *Wagons West*, a tale of the old Oregon Trail. About five years ago Miss Page began work on the novel under review dealing with an earlier American frontier, upland Virginia in the eighteenth century.

The bibliography appended testifies to the thoroughness of her study. Her acknowledgments reveal extensive travel to and research in great source collections such as the Library of Congress. She personally visited many Virginia courthouses, examined their records and absorbed local atmosphere. She significantly acknowledges the inspiration and influence of Stephen Vincent Benet who read the manuscript entire and offered valuable criticism. The avowed purpose of the novel is to "make vivid the processes by which modern America developed out of the colonial conditions of the eighteenth century."

In time the novel covers the period from 1754 to 1806 and she has chosen Thomas Jefferson as the individual about whom the story is woven. She has created two families, the Howards and Peytons, and the story revolves about three generations. Matthew Howard, an upland Virginia youth, goes from a cabin in the Blue Ridge to school where he meets and becomes a lifelong friend of Thomas Jefferson. Young Howard marries aristocratic Jane Peyton of Tidewater and against the wishes of her family they move to the wild West of the Shenandoah Valley. The aristocratic Jane is no admirer of Thomas Jefferson. She regards his ideas as being treason to his class. She is fundamentally Hamiltonian in philosophy, standing for order, tradition, quality and the established order. Matthew, however, true to his frontier background is an ardent Jeffersonian, hating standing armies, creditors and privilege.

And so a domestic argument begins which continues to the final pages. The debate runs through three generations. One son, Peyton, marries the daughter of a French philosopher and becomes an ardent Jeffersonian; another son, James, marries into the New York aristocracy as Alexander Hamilton had done and becomes an ardent Hamiltonian; a daughter, Mary, repeats her mother's "mistake" and marries a rough frontiersman of Virginia's new frontier of the Northwest Territory. The story closes in 1806 with Matthew and Jane visiting their grandchildren in Ohio and proudly inspecting a great-grandson.

Miss Page manages to deal with much of the constitutional history of the period. She finds the "roots" of American liberty in the "fertile soil" of pre-Revolutionary Virginia. The "hot-bed" is the period of the Revolution. During the Confederation, the plant grows into an "untrimmed tangle." This is "pruned" at the Federal Convention and early Federalist period and "mutilated" during the last days of the administration of John Adams. Jefferson rescues liberty and sets it to "symmetrical growing" again. Essentially all this is true, but not entirely so.

The tree of liberty was, in fact, already a fair-sized sapling by 1754. Its roots run as far back as sixteenth century Calvinism and New England shares in its birth on American soil. The roots of liberty are also found in the constitutional conflicts and political theory of Stuart England and in the conditions of American life in the seventeenth century. It reached its highest growth, of course, in the period of the novel—in Jefferson's great Declaration, in the Virginia and Massachusetts Bills of Rights, in the first ten amendments and in Jefferson's first inaugural. But it is well to remember that "property," omitted from the Declara-

tion, was specifically recognized in the various bills of rights. And liberty was not identical with "democracy" in its modern sense. As late as 1821 Chancellor Kent said that universal suffrage jeopardized "the principles of liberty." And it is just as well to recall that liberty was not always the same as "liberalism." Oliver Cromwell, the father of Anglo-Saxon liberty, had Charles I convicted on an *ex post facto* statute before a political court appointed by a purged Parliament. The Virginia Bill of Rights did not prevent the Patriots from torturing the Tories and Thomas Jefferson would gladly have hanged Aaron Burr for treason on inconclusive evidence. Even so it is still true that the men of that day did most profoundly believe in something which they called "liberty"—a vague term which, somehow, they came romantically to accept as the symbol of America enlightening the world.

The conflict between Matthew and Jane is the grand debate of American history; the one hating standing armies, taxation, creditors and special privilege; the other, standing for order, tradition, quality and the established order. It is the conflict between the words in the Preamble of the Constitution—"justice" and "domestic tranquility," between creditor and debtor, between agrarian Virginia and maritime and industrial New England. In short it is the conflict between Jefferson and Hamilton. It was a conflict won by neither. Modern America, like the great-grandson of Matthew and Jane has some of the good qualities of both.

As Matthew and Jane looked upon their great-grandson there is the suggestion that the conflict would continue into succeeding generations. Here is a chance for a sequel, another novel about the great-grandson of the great-grandson. In time it should cover the period from 1885 to 1939. Matthew Howard, IV, of Albemarle Hall—what will be his views on universal suffrage in Virginia, on the income tax, free silver, Wilson's "New Freedom," and the Sedition Act of the World War? What will he think of Mr. Justice Holmes' dissenting opinions in *Lochner v. New York* and *Abrams v. United States*, of Wilson's first inaugural, of Hoover's speech on rugged individualism? There is room here for another novel with a penetrating satire.

Dr. Dryasdust, that estimable fellow whom Allan Nevins has described as head of the pedantic school of history—a man with an enormous reputation as a scholar based largely on talk about his forthcoming *magnum opus* which never came forth, will probably wag his learned head and say Miss Page's novel is "popular fiction." The present reviewer is prepared to defy the erudite Dryasdust and pronounce

this a remarkably good, accurate and interesting study. He can not presume to call it a great novel. Indeed, some of the critics have said there is nothing in it which would make a maiden blush or a Daughter of the Revolution protest. But it is in the main good history and considerably more significant than much of the deadly monographs that pass as history. Dumas Malone has suggested that the historian might well begin to write something that somebody would read besides himself. Miss Page has done this.

The only criticism the present reviewer has to offer is that Miss Page should have sent some of the Howards and Peytons to Liberty Hall Academy. Finally, in traveling up and down the Valley it seems logical to suppose that some of the characters might have passed through Lexington, already a no mean city "thirteen hundred feet long and nine hundred feet wide" according to the modest dimensions of *Hening's Statutes*.

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