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BOOKS REVIEWED—TWO GENERATIONS by *Osbert Sitwell*, THE STRANGE LIVES OF ONE MAN by *Ely Culbertson*, PURBECK SHOP by *Eric Benfield*, THE MOST HAUNTED HOUSE IN ENGLAND by *Harry Price*

LIVES AND GHOSTS

TWO *Generations*, by Osbert Sitwell (Macmillan, 15s. net), easily the most charming book of the month, really two books in one, resembles a pair of Victorian water-

better." The life recollected in the first is incredibly remote from the life we know; the picture of the Scottish Highlands in the thirties and forties is of a dour, grim world not yet made fashionable by sportsmen and Balmoral, a life in which coal and meat had to be brought forty odd miles by coach, and in which a maid and footman could die of cold while riding on the back of a carriage across the Spittal of Glenshee. The life of the second is one in which "nothing eventful ever occurs"—that is to say, eventful in

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colours. The hands are those of two of Mr. Sitwell's descendants: Miss Georgiana Caroline Sitwell, born 1824, who is writing in the seventies and eighties of her life as she remembers it in the thirties and forties; and Miss Florence Sitwell, born in 1858, who is writing in the middle seventies of her life as she lives it from day to day. The one, therefore, is a memoir, the other a diary; the author of the first is an exceptionally cultivated woman looking back across a century of which her "first and strongest impression of change" was of "the ugliness that has swallowed up the country"; the author of the second is a young girl who has "an endless and touching belief in, and reliance on, the power of religion to support her; a woman shy, sensitive, and unworldly . . . whose absurdities are endearing, and whose Victorian priggishness, such as it is, was not her own, but had been caught from people older than herself, who should have known

itself—though owing to "the probability of the Second Advent of our Lord" which "so many people think now is not far distant, there persists a pleasant sense of expectancy"; it is a life of tea-parties, prayer-meetings, Moody and Sankey, Dean Farrar, visits to Cannes, nutting in the woods, family worship, parental smugness—the identical world so beautifully satirized, as Mr. Osbert Sitwell points out in an admirable preface, in *The Way of All Flesh*. The hand that paints the picture of the thirties and forties is cultured, steady, talented; the eye behind it sharply and admirably receptive—the result, again as Mr. Sitwell points out, "stippled with a touching rustic elegance." The hand at work in the diary catches like a spider's web the dew of youth and the sunlight of insignificant and yet incomparably beautiful first experiences. Both are pictures of time long since gone; the beauty and truth of both are heightened by

the ugliness and misery of the world in which they will now be read.

Mr. Ely Culbertson's title *The Strange Lives of One Man* (Faber & Faber, 15s. net) gives him away. His book is unusual, egocentric, at intervals irritating in its deliberate dramatization of background. Mr. Culbertson was born in Georgian Russia; his mother was Russian, his father an American oil-engineer; the ancestry on the paternal side was a race of "rigid Scotch-Covenanters—tall, powerful, blue-eyed blonds, gentle and ferocious." From the time of his childhood in the Caucasus—"the soaring peaks and grotesque valleys between the Caspian and the Black Seas—a land of milk, honey, and blood"—to the time when he had infected a large portion of the modern social world with the peculiar disease known as contract bridge, his life was full of the coloured adventure that rarely happens to ordinary people. The extraordinary picture of pre-war Russia, with its rigid Southern aristocrats and Cossack banditry, its feudal blood-thirstiness, and its lavish cuisine, is followed by pictures, painted with the same Russian taste for high drama and high colouring, of Mr. Culbertson struggling to make something of his life in Germany, Italy, the Rockies, the Bowery, England, Paris, and New York. All this, if at times slightly overdrawn, is interesting; but the final triumph of the Culbertson Scottish ancestry, the culmination of years of experiment and courage, in the form of the Culbertson system, the issues arising from which rocked the United States like a political revolution, is to me more interesting still. All this in spite of the fact that I regard both bridge and bridge-players as part of a social disease. Yet somehow

Mr. Culbertson succeeds in making both attractive. His secret is, I think, that he is not merely interested in cards, but in people. His sketches of opponents, sceptical of his crazy system, of old-time Pacific coast gamblers, horrified at the idea of playing against a woman, of card-sharpers, with all the art of card-sharpping exposed in two paragraphs, are remarkably alive and fascinating. Wherever it develops on these lines the book is excellent; where it fails is in its slightly self-important excursions into philosophic theory and some nonsense, no doubt important to Mr. Culbertson, about the number of separate personalities that go to make up Mr. Culbertson. For the rest, a fairy-tale of an astonishing one-man success.

If all the people who bite each other's ears and corrode each other's lives at the bridge-tables of England were to demand the use of Purbeck stone in the rebuilding of London, one of the oldest industries in England might be saved from extinction. At present the quarries are silent on Purbeck Isle, from which came stone for Westminster Abbey, the Cathedrals of Salisbury, Ely, and Winchester, and Purbeck quarrymen are idle. The history of this decline in the popularity and use of Purbeck stone is told in *Purbeck Shop, A Stoneworker's Story of Stone*, by Eric Benfield (Cambridge, 12s. 6d. net). Purbeck differs so slightly from Portland stone that only an expert, Mr. Benfield declares, can tell the difference; yet Portland, kinder to work, has almost everywhere displaced Purbeck, which tends to bruise under the clumsy and inexperienced chisel. The race of men who quarried this stone were notable for independence, for the zeal with which they guarded carefully won privileges, for the communal system by

which they settled questions of rights and disputes of labour. There is something sad in the decay of their craft, in the contemporary preference for concrete over stone hewn out and shaped by skilled hands. Mr. Benfield's brief, sober unpolished memorial to them is less of a literary discovery than, for example, *A Wheelwright's Shop*, but it is well worthy of a sturdy and independent race of men and the stone they quarried.

The Most Haunted House in England by Harry Price (Longmans, 10s. 6d. net) is a collection of most extraordinary psychic episodes drawn from the results of a ten-year investigation of the late-Victorian rectory at Borley, Suffolk. Three successive rectors were the subjects of the most amazing series of poltergeist behaviour: bells ringing of their own volition, glass objects smashed on the stairs, cakes of soap bouncing out of wash-basins, keys mysteriously lost, rooms mysteriously locked, windows broken, voices calling, glasses of Burgundy turned to ink, glasses of Sauterne infected with a flavour of eau-de-cologne, persons given black eyes by unseen assailants. To many of these strange happenings, and others, Mr. Harry Price was himself a witness; for the evidence of others he relies on residents of the rectory, servants,

local inhabitants. With his secretary he conducts tape-measure investigations, seals up rooms, takes voluminous notes, spends nights in the empty house itself. Behind it all lies the popular legend of murdered men, black coach, and headless driver. Finally the rectory is destroyed by fire. All these events contribute to what Mr. Price calls "the best authenticated case of haunting in the annals of psychical research." Is there an explanation of these remarkable events, most of them observed by intelligent people, all carefully and soberly documented by Mr. Price and others? It is clear that the mysterious behaviour of inanimate objects is the work of poltergeists—"those mischievous entities whose pranks are usually as noisy as they are senseless." But what of the ghostly forms themselves? Can they be authentic? or are they mere subjective hallucinations? Mr. Price, as he is well qualified to do, attempts to answer these questions soberly, objectively, without ever being dogmatic. He advances an interesting theory that all these manifestations had "a definite and determinable periodicity—they recurred at definite intervals," and concludes that "the spirit hypothesis is the one that best covers many of the observed phenomena at Borley Rectory."

AN APOLOGY

We ask our readers' indulgence for the delay in publishing this issue of *Books of the Month*. Our printers have been working under trying conditions.