

CURRENT OPINION

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REBECCA WEST—

“THE LAST BIRTH OF TIME”



REBECCA WEST CARICATURED BY WELLS

“Miss Rebecca West, pensive, after writing her well-known opinion of that Great Good Woman-Soul, Miss Ellen Key,” is the caption placed by H. G. Wells under his drawing of a naughty little girl, trailing an enormous pen behind her back, which drips—surely—blood, not ink.

IN one of H. G. Wells' most suggestive and whimsical books, “Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and The Last Trump,” we find among the notes on an imaginary paper, read before an imaginary world conference: “Disrespect a natural disposition in the young. Checked and subdued in small societies, but now happily rampant in the uncontrollable English-speaking communities. The new (undignified) criticism. . . . Insurrection of the feminine mind against worship. Miss Rebecca West as the last birth of time.”

Miss West is at present the star dramatic critic of the London feminist weekly, *Time and Tide*, and her “Notes on Novels” add a certain gaiety to the sober pages of the *New Statesman*. She is almost as well known in this country as in England, for some of her most lively criticism has appeared in our *New Republic*, and her first fiction, “The Return of the Soldier,” an original work of art, found an American publisher. Her writing is almost all distinguished by a spirit of iconoclasm. She is, perhaps, that first woman creative critic for which, we are told, the world is anxiously waiting. Her short career (she is now only twenty-six or seven years old) is outlined and commented upon by Amy Wellington in the *Literary Review* of the *New York Evening Post*. Miss Wellington writes:

“Eight years ago, when Dora Marsden edited the London *Freewoman*, her staff reviewer was a girl of eighteen, who signed her startling articles with the no less startling name of Ibsen's most sinister heroine—‘Rebecca West.’ She was the *enfant terrible* of English criticism, impudent, shatteringly witty, with an occasional lightninglike intensity of revelation, and imaginative power. For her there were no sanctities. She did not veil with words her most daring observations. She was neither tolerant nor overkindly, but one knew that this sometimes crude intolerance was only a matter of impatient youth, and not of limitations. Rebecca West's young eyes were wide open to the abominations of this world, and she meant to destroy them completely with her wit.”

Rebecca West's real name is Regina Miriam Bloch, which she rejected, according to her own confession, because it “sug-

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gested a lovely blond in a white muslin frock with a blue sash,"—and she "recognized her limitations"! She left school at the age of 16 and "joined the cranks," having been "indicted" for writing a poem on "The Death of God" in the cookery class. Miss Wellington continues:

"She was fortunate in beginning her career at a time when English literature and journalism were alive with rebellious writers. In those happy days before the war, it was a constant gay fight in print for one's ideas and opinions, and Rebecca West was soon in the front ranks of the rebels, slashing away at the sanctities, until Mrs. Humphry Ward, the chaperon of English letters, 'blushed publicly for the *Free-woman*,' as H. G. Wells observed, in the columns of the *London Times*."

There were no sanctities for Rebecca West even on her own side. She did not "sit enrapt, with face uplifted," at the feet of Bernard Shaw or H. G. Wells. On the contrary, she "pointed a derisive finger at their weaknesses." "Impossible to imagine," as Mr. Wells remarks, "greatness nestling comfortably upon . . . Rebecca West."

At the beginning of the war, Miss West became a regular contributor to the *New Republic*, enlivening its pages with her headlong articles. But, says Miss Wellington, "it was a somewhat chastened Rebecca, more individualistic and romantic, proclaiming art—and particularly the artist—with a capital A, until she publicly mourned over 'Mr. Shaw's Diverted Genius' and threw a stone at the Fabian Society. Her romanticism began to take unexpected turns until it arrived squarely at the last romantic pitfall of the young revolutionary writer—the wisdom and glory of the proletariat."

The war sobered Rebecca West. It made her somewhat more conventional, Miss Wellington remarks. "She wrote about 'The Women of England' (a title which might have suggested itself to Mrs. Humphry Ward!) for the *Atlantic Monthly*. And she wrote acceptably. One settled down! But presently the curious reader was sitting up again at that masterpiece of journalistic wit and impudence, her article on Ellen Key, entitled 'Eroto-Priggery.'"

For years, Ellen Key had been solemnly proclaimed the priestess of a higher sexual and social ethics. What she had really given the world, according to Rebecca West, was "eroto-priggery," a new kind of worship of Eros. And for this reason, not for any other, she had won a place in the heart of nations. Miss Wellington goes further:

"It had already been remarked, tho not conspicuously in print, that Ellen Key's ethics were an old maid's philosophy. No one but Rebecca West, however, ven-



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tered the definite statement that the famous Swedish woman's voluminous works merely 'marked the first appearance of the Victorian aunt as a philosopher.' . . . Moreover, the great priestess-philosopher is afflicted with a vagueness of statement which makes her meaning very doubtful. The present writer, for instance, happened to discover, one day, in pasting a quotation from the new philosophy on her 'copy,' that it was quite possible to cut a paragraph in two, place the end before the beginning, and read it with equal understanding either way. Did she call attention to any lack of clearness in her eloquent author? She did not. It was young Rebecca West who, heedlessly trampling on