

The New Argonautica

Astronomy

THE NEW ARGONAUTICA—W. B. Drayton Henderson.—*Macmillan* (\$3).

An epic is a poem of daring deeds. In the case of this epic the poem is a daring deed. For the author has had the courage to take modern astronomy as his theme, the galaxy as his scene, a Greek myth as his model and the heroes of all ages as his characters. For his New Argo is manned by an all-star crew picked from all periods, the spirits of Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, Ponce de Leon, Cabeza de Vaca, Alaric, Atli, Genseric and Timur. The Argo is the symbol of the modern spirit. The Golden Fleece is the same as Maeterlinck's Blue Bird.

From a scientific point of view the interest of the epic lies in its utilization of modern ideas of the cosmos, even conceptions that have not yet been acclimated to the minds of the readers of scientific literature, still less so familiar that they as to become fit for poetical usage according to the traditional theory. For it used to be held that only antiquated words and symbols were proper in poetry, the older the better. As though poetry like fungus flourished only on ruins and decay. But the younger generation of poets is more courageous. Here is a professor of literature in a New England college employing not only the myths of Homer the visions of Dante, and the fancies of Spencer but the discoveries of Eddington and Millikan. Take for instance this picture of a star to which the vessel passed close enough to get a good view:

Standing from the edge
Of the sail's protection, studying the star,
Raleigh ignored them. 'Was it similar
To Earth's? . . . in youth? . . . how did
its loss repair?

Gust after gust of fine ethereal air
Broke through rent floccules of erupting
gas

From the emissive core's conflicting mass
Of violent combustion in which heat
Systems of atoms whirled, burst, beat
With freed electrons on the flaming wall,
Expanding it; or by centripetal
Forces compelled, recombined instantly
With shattered systems, or stripped nuclei,
To whirl again in swift atomic round.

Between 1906 and 1926, rising standards of medical education created a difficult situation for smaller medical schools and the number of medical colleges in this country dropped from 162 to 80.

The ship in its voyage through interstellar space came so near to Algol that it was likely to be pulled in by gravitation but was saved in time by an explosion caused by the tidal action of a dark star, as Raleigh explains:

Raleigh did not turn
His eyes from their research, the shrunken
star

Now fading out astern. 'Also we are
As you (he said) deep in the darkness' debt.
The dark star freed us. We were annexed
yet,

The latest province to imperial light
Had not doom waked disruptions opposite
To gravity that gluts it . . . Increased mass
Brings increased pressure of ethereal gas,
As, let us say, Thessalia overcome
Made hotter conflicts at the heart of Rome.
Added to which, stretched circuits bring in
course

Peripheral speed and centrifugal force
The more repellent: till, in providence,
Empires and stars stand in equivalence
Of give and get, of gather and repel.'

The mingling of ancient myth with modern science has this advantage that it shows by contrast how much more the modern conceptions appeal to the imagination; the ancient symbols belittle while the modern expand the mind. The author has an amazing wealth of illustrative material. To understand all his allusions the reader would have to be familiar with Apollonius Rhodius, the Coal Sack, the campaign of the Masurian Lakes, the lives of the Lombard kings, Egyptian theology, Aztec history, Devon geography, Evelyn's diary, Hakluyt's Voyages, Hardy's Dynasts, Wells' Outline, Gibbon's Rome, Elizabethan pharmacology, Milton, Einstein, Shapley, Dante and Dean Inge—and still he would miss many of them. But fortunately for the less learned of us the author gives very full references and interpretations in his notes and arguments. Professor Henderson is a voyager in actuality on this earth as well as in imagination in outer space. Various cantos of his epic were written while he was in Rome, Jamaica, Yale, Mt. Carmel, Montreal, Oxford, Switzerland and Dartmouth.

—EDWIN E. SLOSSON.

Science News-Letter, September 1, 1928

A committee of traffic experts, drafting a model code for cities, voted in favor of the three-color system of traffic lights, opposing the idea of eliminating the yellow light, meaning "caution".

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Wild silkworms when hatched climb upward in search of leafy food, but the domestic silkworms merely wave their heads about and wait to be fed.