

The Literary Culture of France: Studies in the Essential Character and Permanent Values of French Literature from the Earliest Times to the Present

Collected, edited and annotated by J E G Dixon (1949) (New English Review Press, 2013)

by Carol J Harvey writes in "The Postmaster" is the annual journal of Merton College Oxford:

Who cannot bring to mind the names of one or two French writers? From 'La Chanson de Roland' and troubadour songs of the Middle Ages onwards, the works of French writers have circulated widely, and have been read, discussed and imitated beyond the boundaries of time and place. France's literary pantheon includes men (and sometimes women) of every century and its literary leadership is clear.

To what does French literature owe its universal appeal? What qualities do its celebrated writers have in common? These are the questions that Jack Dixon (1949) addresses in this collection. He presents 17 essays, all in English translation (some translated for this book by Dr Dixon himself) and written by critics, essayists and philosophers, novelists and poets. All focus on an aspect of the 'broad historical sweep' of French literature, starting with the background from Louis Cazamian's *A History of French Literature*, and ending with Albert Camus's 1957 Nobel Prize speech. Occasional explanatory footnotes and an index complete the book.

All the selected essays offer insights into the ideas and values enshrined in the writings they discuss. Included are essays by great critics such as Ferdinand Brunetière on 'The Essential Character of French Literature'; Georges Duhamel's 'The Church of French Literature'; Gustave Rudler's 'The Morality of French Literature'; and Wallace Fowlie on 'The French Literary Mind'. Among the well-known authors are novelist André Gide in dialogue with literary critic Charles Du Bos, and poet Paul Valéry; of note is a lecture given by Valéry shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, and stating 'Our special quality... is to believe and to feel that we are universal by which I mean men of universality'.

Dr Dixon's own views come through clearly in his Introduction, his Preface to the Epilogue on the Twentieth Century, and by virtue of his selection of the final texts. Excerpts from essayist Julien Benda's *The Treason of the Intellectuals* point to the shortcomings of 20th-century writers who betray the purpose of literature by espousing moral uncertainty and relativity. For philosopher Simone Weil, the works of 'writers of genius... have in them the force of gravity which governs our souls... writers do not have to be professors of morals, but they do have to profess the human condition'. Likewise, in Camus' Nobel Prize speech 'An Artist's Creed', he states that 'Art... is a means of moving the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged portrayal of common sufferings and joys'.

This is an impressive book, the fruit of a lifetime's study of French literature and personal reflections on values and moral principles. There is no single, simple answer to the questions Dr Dixon poses in his Introduction: 'Is there such a thing as an "essential character" of French literature? Can any unifying qualities or values be discerned in French literature, from its beginnings to the present?' There is, however, ample material in this book for the reader to come to his own conclusions.

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of Winnipeg**