

GOOD AND BAD WRITING ABOUT THE WAR

By Frederick James Gregg



*Howard Copeland, the American psychologist—
in his uniform as a driver of a French ambulance—
who has written the most brilliant philosophical
article which has appeared about the war*

NO RECOGNIZED literary person, male or female, here or abroad, has increased his or her reputation by anything written about the war. On the other hand, four unfamiliar authors, of widely differing activities, have produced things which will last as literature after the tumult and the fighting are over. Two of these are Americans, the third a Belgian, and the fourth an Irishman. Here they are: Howard Copeland, the psychologist who wrote the astonishing article which appeared in the *New York Times*, on December 5, 1914, and which was entitled, "Germany Suffering from a 'Morbid Complex'"; Gertrude Aldrich, author of the recent letters in the *Atlantic* entitled "the Little House on the Marne"; Cardinal Mercier, author of the great Belgian Pastoral, and W. F. Bailey, the Irishman, whose papers on Croatia, Silicia and Poland, in the English reviews and quarterlies have been the wonder of two continents.

These four and these four only are free from the bias, the passion, the bitterness engendered by the struggle. But above their lack of bias, was their literary quality. Cheerful, witty, or serene, they have added to the world's permanent literary wealth, and in each case, it appears, without any thought of fame or notoriety. Miss Aldrich wrote her letters without any thought of publication; Copeland had something to say, as a scientific man, and said it; the Cardinal had a routine duty to perform and so performed it; the Irish Land Commissioner was stirred to tell what he knew about certain small and misunderstood nations.

WRITING ABOUT THE WAR

The result, in each case, has been a sincere, lasting and graphic literary achievement. Put the work of the four authors together on your shelves and you'll have pure gold. All the rest, the thousand and one war books, the magazines full of war articles, may serve a useful purpose, argumentative or informing, but they will be forgotten and disappear, like the shells that litter the ground in Flanders, or like the little oily bubbles of the German submarines.

It is shocking to think how flat, stale and unprofitable our great literary persons have become under the stress of circumstances. Anatole France has become as serious as a member of the Chamber of Deputies; Emile Verhaeren wails about the woes of his country; Henry James flies into a temper, despairs of his country and changes his allegiance; Gabriele d'Annunzio becomes a mob orator; Rudyard Kipling is a sort of amateur recruiting sergeant; Bertrand Russell is argumentative and uninteresting, for the first time in his life; Hillaire Belloc is now that most tedious of all things, a newspaper exponent of strategy; Lord Bryce is an investigator of outrages; while Arnold Bennett is a trained newspaper reporter.

AS FOR the poets and composers, the best that they seem able to do is to give us something like Ernst Lissauer's "Chant of Hate." Of course it must be admitted that the youngsters of all the warring nations are at the front. But that does not explain the breakdown of the older men at home. As for the "war plays" so called, compare, if you can, any of them with the first war play of all, Euripides' "Trojan Women." Compare any topical song of the moment with the Marseillaise, or any oratorical address with the Gettysburg speech.

Howard Copeland's article should be put in the hands of every scientific student in the land as a model to be kept in mind. William James, if he were alive, would wish that he had written it. But perhaps even he could never have attained to the devilish felicity of expression that it displays. Oddly enough, Copeland was talked about before the war as a sort of unknown genius who would probably never do anything of any value at all.