Books of the Times

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

FOR fifty years André Gide has been one of the most admired and influential of French writers. The prolific author of fifty volumes of verse, drama, fiction, essays and literary criticism, he is a man whose subtle intellect, whose technical dexterity and whose bold defiance of conventional standards have made him the acknowledged dean of French letters. But André Gide has not won a transatlantic reputation at all comparable with his French and European one. In this country he is known only to a small coterie who specialize in French literature and to a slightly larger group who remember with the mixed emotions of shock and admiration his brilliant novel, "The Counterfeiters." And it is quite likely that many potential readers of Gide have been repelled by his self-confessed abnormality and by what he has called his "flirtation" with communism—an affair he had the wisdom to terminate.

André Gide

Today Volume One of "The Journals of André Gide"* is published in this country in an excellent translation by Justin O'Brien. It covers the years 1889 to 1913, the years when M. Gide was 20 to 44 years old. It includes a thirty-page "glossary of persons," an index, a sympathetic and perceptive introduction by Mr. O'Brien and is an extremely handsome example of book-making. If reading it does not do much to make clear the reasons for the fame of M. Gide's other works, it at least provides many passages of impressively expert writing and a vivid impression of the mind of its author.

His Self-Analysis Extraordinary

But these journals are inevitably of interest chiefly to those who are already interested in M. Gide. Without such an interest, I feel sure, they would seem only intermittently brilliant and all too frequently quite dull. Far too many of the entries are mere records of the trivia of living, of books read, of people met socially, etc. But those which are concerned with M. Gide's favorite subject, his own character, are extraordinary examples of self-analysis.

André Gide is a complex, paradoxical, courageous, wise and foolish man. His life in some ways seems to have been a search for the finest means of self-expression and the finest means of achieving his own best potentialities. The search has been desperately earnest and has led to marvels of intricate introspection. It led M. Gide from the devout Protestant Puritanism of his youth to the extravagant acceptance of all experience of his maturity and age. It made him a profound student of painting and music as well as of literature. It made him a prodigious reader, a man who reads on buses and while walking on sidewalks.

When M. Gide was only 21 he was vain enough to write: "I suffer absurdly from the fact that everybody does not already know what I hope some day to be; that people cannot foretell the work to come just from the look in my eyes." When he was 36 his complacent pride had not diminished a jot: "I feel with joy, and in detail, all the qualities of my style. In the whole book there are not four sentences that I should like to change." And, although he had many friends, he was always extraordinarily self-centered: "I have found the secret of my boredom in Rome: I do not find myself interesting here."

Descriptive Writing Excellent

There are many fine bits of descriptive writing in these journals, accounts of travel in Italy and North Africa. There are some clever epigrams: "Morality consists in substituting for the natural creature (the old Adam) a fiction that you prefer. But then you are no longer sincere. The old Adam is the sincere man." Now such writing may be clever, but it is a willfully perverse method of justifying any conduct which is "sincere" no matter how immoral. There are some malicious anecdotes: " 'You must be very happy,' someone said to his wife, 'to see him become so religious.' 'I! Why, I'm as sorry as I can be!' she exclaimed; 'so long as he wasn't religious, I was able to count on religion to improve his character; now I have given up counting on anything.' "

M. Gide mentions many of his celebrated friends, Pierre Louis, d'Annunzio, Léon Blum, Valery and Claudel; but he does so briefly in the manner of a diary without describing them at any length. He mentions hundreds of books and seems to have enjoyed the lesser works of Stevenson and many a long-forgotten novel with real relish. The four authors whom he read and re-read with the most ardent admiration were Pascal, Montaigne, Stendhal and Dostoevsky.

Although a great variety of subject matter and a wide range of literary methods may be found in these journals, one striking impression dominates all others; and that is M. Gide's emotional intensity, his alternate ascent to peaks of joy and physical well-being and descent to an avernus of acute depression, nervousness, insomnia and gloom. Amateur psychiatrists would have no trouble finding plenty of evidence of manic depression in these pages. The man who could weep in the Louvre at the sight of Titian's painting, "Man With a Glove," and could weep again in the streets when he watched the King of Spain ride by was hardly in normal control of his emotions. But, there can be no doubt, that that same man has one of the most acute minds and one of the most genuine literary talents of his generation.

*THE JOURNALS OF ANDRE GIDE. Translated by Justin O'Brien. 411 pages. Knopf. $5.