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BY H. L. MENCKEN

## *Bierce Emerges From the Shadows*

AMBROSE BIERCE: A BIOGRAPHY, by Carey McWilliams. \$3.50. 9 x 5½; 358 pp. New York: Albert & Charles Boni.

THIS is the fourth biography of Bierce to appear within the space of a year—certainly a sufficient proof that interest in him, for long confined to a small sect of *Feinschmecker*, has begun to be general. It is by long odds the best of the four, not only because it presents a great deal of important material that the others lack, but also because its point of view is more judicious.

Mr. C. Hartley Grattan's "Bitter Bierce," the first life to be published, contained some shrewd criticism, but its principal conclusion remained somewhat dubious; moreover, the biographical portions stood on shaky ground. Dr. Danziger's "Portrait" dealt with Danziger far more than it dealt with Bierce, and Danziger turned out to be an extremely unimportant and uninteresting person. So, in a measure, with Mr. Neale's "Life": he had a lot to say about Bierce that was not familiar, but he stopped too often to boast about Neale. Mr. McWilliams avoids all of these follies. He has gone to immense pains to unearth his facts, he sets them forth in a clear manner, and when he pauses to philosophize upon them he speaks very sensibly. Altogether, he has done an admirable piece of work. There are still some holes in the record—no one really knows, for example, how or where Bierce died—but in so far as making it complete was humanly possible Mr. McWilliams has done so, and he has added no gratuitous speculations of his own.

He dissents sharply from Mr. Neale's interesting theory that Bierce was not

really killed in Mexico, as is commonly believed, but went to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado and there committed suicide. The new evidence, apparently unknown to Neale, seems to make that theory untenable. Not only is it now certain that Bierce really entered Mexico; it is known that he wrote home from there, and a record of his letters, though not the texts thereof, was preserved by his friend and secretary, Miss Carrie Christiansen. This record, shortly before Miss Christiansen's death, passed to Bierce's daughter, Mrs. Helen Isgrigg, and by her it was placed in Mr. McWilliams' hands. It shows that her father was in the State of Chihuahua, on December 16, 1913, that he was in contact with a body of Mexican troops—whether of the loyal army or of the rebels does not appear—and that he was expecting to proceed soon to Torreón, where there was fighting. After that—silence. Where and when he was killed (or died otherwise) is not known. Four or five circumstantial stories are in circulation, but all of them fall far short of persuasiveness. But if Bierce actually reached the front, as now seems overwhelmingly probable, it becomes almost impossible to believe that he later returned to the United States, and, making his way to the Grand Canyon, there committed suicide. And it becomes equally impossible to believe, as many persons have believed in California, that he died in an asylum for the insane at Napa.

Mr. McWilliams clears off many other legends about Bierce, and in general brings him down from the region of fable and gives him reality. The old whispers about Mrs. Bierce are shown to be without ground, the various fantastic stories about the death of Bierce's son, Day, are disposed

of by relating the plain facts, and there are a dozen or more other such salutary services to the truth. The man who emerges is far more interesting and charming than the old fee-faw-fum. He was not, it appears, the appalling cynic that trembling young reporters used to admire. On the contrary, he was "one of the most idealistic men that his generation produced in America"—in fact, "a great moral force, . . . for he would not lie, and truth alone mattered to him. It came to mean more than beauty; . . . it came to be the paramount value of his life."

His rages were quite natural to such a character. Doomed to live in a country in which, by God's will, honesty is rare, courage is still rarer, and honor is almost unknown, he found his pruderies outraged at every step. So he fell upon the current mountebanks, great and small, in a Berserker fury, seeking thus to sooth and secure his own integrity. That integrity, so far as I can make out, was never betrayed by compromise. Right or wrong, Bierce always stuck to the truth as he saw it. He was magnificently decent. It cost him something, but he never wavered.

I suspect that his death came just in time. Suppose he had survived into the war years: would he have stood pat, or would he have allowed the prevailing blather to fetch him? His private philosophy, of course, was all against it. He was violently opposed to democracy, and held all its heroes in contempt. Somewhere in the present book Mr. McWilliams records his blistering opinion of the absurd Jenkins, Walter Hines Page; and in another place he is denounced in his turn by that other exponent of bogus idealism, Franklin K. Lane. But would he have resisted the full pressure, once it was turned on in 1917? I am not so sure. Mark Twain, plainly enough, would have succumbed at once: his death in 1910 spared a candid world some very painful scenes. Bierce, of course, would have been harder to run amok, but that he would have held out to the end is not to be put down as certain.

Thus I find myself rather glad that the Mexicans disposed of him in 1913, before the great test really confronted him. If he had held on to the common sense and common decency of his life-long devotion the professional patriots of the time would have badgered him cruelly, and if he had compromised ever so little it would have been a sad and shameful thing.

### *The Art of the Printer*

MODERN TYPOGRAPHY & LAYOUT, by Douglas McMurtrie. \$7.50. 12¾ x 9½; 190 pp. Chicago: The Eynco Press.

THIS stately work, at first glance, will probably be taken for a German production, for in both type and make-up it forcibly suggests the bold, somewhat raucous printing that the Germans have been doing since the war, and especially in the past few years. The influence of that printing is also widespread in the United States; in the advertising pages of the magazines one is constantly confronted by its bold black masses, its modernistic illustrations, and its harsh, angular, uncompromising faces of type. Mr. McMurtrie is strongly in favor of it, though with certain prudent reservations. He is in favor of getting the useless serifs off of letters, but he is still in some doubt about abandoning capitals. His own book is set in a new face called Stellar Bold, with headings in Ultra-Modern—this last designed by himself—but he is constrained to say that "I do not think we have yet produced a modern type suited to text or body composition." The Stellar Bold helps to prove it. It is, looked at in isolation, a remarkably clear and straightforward face, but a full page of it looks somehow harsh, and a whole volume of it grows unendurable. In type, as in life, it is not possible to be explicit all the time. There must be some softness, some vagueness.

But the new typography is not a thing of type faces alone; it depends for its character upon design in a wider sense—on what printers call layout. In the typical typographical design of the old style all