

# THE LIBRARY

## *The Tough-Muscle Boys of Literature*

BY BURTON RASCOE

IN the September *Harper's Magazine*, the editor has a note saying that, following an address by Archibald MacLeish before the American Association of Adult Education in New York City — an address attacking anti-war writers — a flood of manuscripts inundated the *Harper's* offices, all on the same subject and expressing the same point of view. The editorial note continues: "None came from unknown persons. All were by writers of reputation. Such a manifestation had to be dealt with, and out of the many, we selected the lead article in this issue." This lead article was entitled, "The Inner Threat: Our Own Softness," by Roy Helton. Now, it should be pointed out that just because many writers suddenly take up an idea and rewrite it in articles, it doesn't follow that the idea has any validity. It might mean that the idea was so half-witted that anybody could express it; or it might mean that some authors, needing money

for the rent, have said to themselves: "That's the sort of tripe editors now seem to want." It doesn't necessarily mean that they have any real convictions about what they are writing.

When you examine Mr. Helton's article, you will find that not only are he and Mr. MacLeish peddling the same side of the street, but that they both have the same line of shoddy. You will also find that both their spiels have about the same intellectual context and rhetorical beauty as those advertisements in the backs of trashy magazines which offer for sale electrical belts and medicinal compounds to renew manly vigor, pep up one's interest in life and make one a knock-out with the ladies. The advertisements, or their products (even though there is something pathetic about the sort of customers they appeal to), perhaps do no harm. But I think that the quack medicines of MacLeish, Helton, *et al.*, very well may cause great

harm to our national culture, decency and common sense; for they are symptomatic of a philosophy, or, at least, a way of thinking, that seems to be unhappily becoming a vogue. It is the same philosophy, expressed with great emphasis, clarity and point, *ad nauseam*, in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Although Herr Hitler is no great shakes as a literary artist himself, he certainly puts it all over MacLeish in the matter of knowing just what he means and just how to say it.

Mr. MacLeish — and I take him primarily as representative of this new gleam-in-the-eye, tough-muscle, and men-and-youth-forward sort of haranguing — argues that he and other writers of his generation, including Hemingway and Dos Passos, were “defeatist”; that, having participated in the last war, they were quite wrong in describing war as other than a nice, noble and elevating experience. Herr Hitler in *Mein Kampf* says the same thing. He says, like Helton and MacLeish, that men should not be coddled; that they should be made to realize that the State is more important than any individual; that you can't have a healthy State unless you have most of the clucks drilling in barracks squads; that you must put the women back in the kitchen; and

that all this sentimental nonsense which poets and novelists write about tragedy, sorrow, aspiration, love and home has to be stopped.

Herr Hitler ordered the public burning of all “softening” books, including Eric Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Ludwig Renn's *War*. Mr. MacLeish, though he is now Librarian of Congress, has not yet reached the point of power where he can order the burning of books he doesn't like; but everything he writes, lately, indicates that he would do just that if he could. And the same itch to order other writers around is pretty evident in the essay on *The Irresponsibles*<sup>1</sup> and in the hosannas it has evoked from the new jutting-jaw school of literature.

## II

It was bad enough having MacLeish seriously referred to as a poet or playwright. It's rather appalling having him suddenly cast, or self-cast, in the role of Führer. I thought it swell when I heard that Archie was getting \$15,000 a year polishing up the gold-plated mustache cups of *Fortune* magazine; we all have to make a living in the

<sup>1</sup> *The Irresponsibles*, by Archibald MacLeish. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. \$1.00.

best way we know how. But still, I thought it queer that of the long list of editors and writers credited to *Fortune*, about the only one who seemed to be mentioned in other public prints in connection with Il Luce's journalistic empire was MacLeish; I hadn't realized then what a swell press-agent Archie has in himself and how many people he can put to work for him free.

If you think I am hard on MacLeish as a writer, read, or try to read, one of his "poems" or "dramas." This is a sample:

The gears turn: twitter: are  
Still now. The sound dies.  
From the east with the sun's rising  
Daily are fewer whistles:  
Many mornings listening  
One less or two.

Even after writing stuff like that Mr. MacLeish never hesitates to hand himself all the berries. In the matter here under consideration, he has no scruples about asserting that he *himself* and Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos constituted the whole World War and postwar generation and warning us that these are three writers whose postwar stuff we should avoid, or else! For twenty years 130,000,000 people in this country *did* avoid reading what Archibald MacLeish wrote. In the 'twenties the authors who were most influen-

tial and popular were Booth Tarkington, Edna Ferber, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Fannie Hurst, Ring Lardner, H. L. Mencken, Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Edna Millay, Vernon L. Parrington and so on. None of these was "defeatist." While these people were writing, and influencing people's minds, Archie was laboriously trying to imitate T. S. Eliot and Conrad Aiken and turning out egocentric, unreadable stuff entitled *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* and *Nobodaddy*. Yet his whole current attack on the "soft" and squeamish war realists rests on the assumption of his own importance, now doubly weighty through a public act of contrition.

Mr. MacLeish forgets that just before we got into the last war there was a school of writing like the one he and the other tough-muscle boys are trying to drum up. It included such writers, enormously popular at the time, as Arthur Guy Empey, Coningsby Dawson, Ian Hay Beith, Sergeant York and Colonel Swinton, to name but a few once so widely known. These gallant authors (or their ghosts) wrote books which glorified war. They did it better than MacLeish can do now.

Mr. Dawson, son of a fine, conscientious, British-born Epis-

copal minister in Newark, New Jersey, wrote in *Carry On* (1917), *The Glory of the Trenches* (1918), and other repeaters along the same idea, great soul-filling junk about how extraordinarily war had regenerated him. By merely donning a uniform, he said, he had been transformed from an ineffectual novelist and a dreamy-eyed poet into a regular he-man, sufficiently acquainted with the realities of life to go about the noble business of exterminating people with a delicious, soul-redeeming feeling of spiritual exaltation. Mr. Dawson's books topped the best-seller lists for a long time. He wrote a great series of them, variations on the theme, while the going was good. The British Foreign Propaganda Ministry thought the sentiment of Mr. Dawson's books was so beautiful that they decided he wasn't needed in his beloved trenches and that it would serve the cause of righteousness best for him to keep on his uniform and face American women's clubs. He was so wonderful that Wilson declared war right away so our boys could put on uniforms too.

The real pay-off came much later — after Philip Gibbs broke down and confessed that he had been lying so much all along while he was a war correspondent that

he had been knighted (he is Sir Philip now), and that it was at last profitable and safe to write a book called *Now It Can Be Told*. The book sold to beat hell, and so Mr. Dawson also got out a volume saying he too had been wrong in his other books and that war isn't really nice the way he had said it was. He cleaned up too. That is what is known as "calling the turn"; it's being where the smart money is. And it works for those who wrote that they *didn't* like the war, just as it works for the Sir Philips and Dawsons.

There isn't anybody smarter than Archie MacLeish when it comes to knowing how to pick out and fall into a good berth, or how to jump onto band wagons. Have you forgotten, or didn't you know, that when the comrades were ruling the literary roost, Archie was chairman and chief-exhorter of the Stalin-directed Second American Writers' Congress which decided, at a big mass-meeting in New York of people who attend anything if they can get free tickets, that Archie was the literary chap who had the best ideas — next to Joe Stalin? Gospodin Stalin, according to Eugene Lyons and, now, also Louis Fischer, has exterminated a good portion of his adoring subjects to keep his job and enforce

the freedom of his own thought.

What sort of a mind is it that can yell for this Stalin in Carnegie Hall, work on *Fortune*, get its owner's picture and a two-page-spread signed advertisement in *Life* endorsing a paste-up movie, and all in the name of idealism? The answer is that it is also the sort of mind that can get its possessor into the job of Librarian of Congress; get a book published selling for a dollar which contains only about thirty pages and about 6500 words which read like this: "Against what but the Western belief in the wholeness of Western civilization was aimed the assault upon a church which was no longer in danger of any ruler and the fabrication of a paganism which needed only the blond sopranos on the ends of wires to be Wagner at his worst?"; and it is the sort of mind which can get a reputable writer, like Van Wyck Brooks to send out a form letter plugging one's books to literary critics.

Most of the letters I get from press-agents of publishing houses show a genuine sense of literary values; they are about books the press-agents personally like and want to see prosper. There is never a hint that I am morally obliged to agree with them or morally obliged to plug the books they send me.

Promotion work for MacLeish's *The Irresponsibles*, however, was something of a different order. I shan't quote the form letter from Mr. Brooks because I have a high admiration for his studies of the New England writers and I wouldn't like to have a full quotation of his letter expose him to hasty judgment. All he said, really, was that he wanted to call my attention to MacLeish's book as a book we all ought to plug. Van Wyck is so naïve about things that are going on nowadays that he probably hasn't read a newspaper since the April 6 issue of the *Boston Traveler*, 1878. The way he swallowed the Cowley-MacLeish-Browder bait of the American Writers' Congresses in the balmy days of People's Front hokum is proof enough. So, when he writes to "call attention" to this booklet of MacLeish's, he probably doesn't know that MacLeish has already seen to it that the papers and magazines have been full of it for months, with pictures and interviews.

The trouble is that Archie is going to get so much publicity about himself and this speech now issued as a book that several people, besides myself, are likely to try to read it; and that's going to be too bad for Mr. MacLeish. As long as the stuff is passed around inac-

curately by word of mouth it at least makes conversation. But if they plow through the original they will see that Archie in his newly fashionable incarnation has the same idea as Hitler but doesn't know how to express it. They will recognize the totalitarian he-man hooley which he has carried over from his brave Bolshevik incarnation and has garnished to suit more contemporary tastes. And I am afraid that is going to be the end

of the notion built up by Archie and all his "tycoons" that Archie is a poet and a thinker.

Jubal may sing of the wrath of God and of the curse of the thistle and thorn, but there are many of us who are Tubal Cains who must get ourselves pointed rods and scabble the earth for corn; and when the Jubals have sung of their hurricane-wracks, we Tubals must take their hand-flung spears and show our neighbors peace.

## THE CHECK LIST

### NON-FICTION

THE DREAM WE LOST, by Freda Utley. \$2.75. *John Day*. Dr. Utley is a British economist and journalist whose past books, on China and Japan, won her critical bouquets in America. The present book, on Russia, however, has been strangely slighted by the daily reviewers. The author turned communist under the impact of the Russian Revolution. She married a Russian and in 1930 went to live in Moscow. She was rapidly cured of her communism but remained in Russia for her husband's sake. After he was, like thousands of other innocents, duly "purged" in 1936, she went home to London. But for years she kept silent in the hope that her husband might be alive and in fear of hurting him. Finally she decided to speak out. The result is this volume, beyond doubt one of the most significant books produced by Stalin's counter-revolution. In the *Saturday Review* of

*Literature*, Professor Bertrand Russell writes: "Various disillusioned books have been written about Russia, but no other combines such intimate knowledge as Miss Utley possesses with such profound sincerity and such extensive economic understanding."

Yet a month after its publication, only two New York papers have taken cognizance of *The Dream We Lost*. If this critical neglect of an anti-communist book were unusual, we could set it down to accident. But it isn't unusual. Dr. Utley's book shares the general fate of Andrew Smith's *I Was a Soviet Worker*, Fred E. Beal's *Proletarian Journey*, Boris Souvarine's *Stalin* and other powerful indictments of the Soviet set-up. Despite the Stalin-Hitler pact and the literary crowd's revision of their noble illusions, the psychological pressures, it would seem, still operate in their minds against books exposing Russia. Certain