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The Long Dream of Thomas Wolfe

BY JOHN TEBBEL

THOSE of us who knew and loved Thomas Wolfe only through the books he wrote have been able to understand him solely by instinct. We have had little illumination from the friends who watched his work and worked with him. Consequently, the long "note" by Edward C. Aswell at the end of *The Hills Beyond*¹ is really more important than the tag-ends of Wolfe manuscript which comprise the book itself because Aswell, who was Tom's last editor, answers many of the questions which Wolfe left hanging when he died in September 1938.

It is now clear that the gangling North Carolina boy studying at Harvard in 1922 had already envisioned as a whole the vast saga which he was to work at continuously in his too-brief lifetime. This "book," as he always called it, was a complete entity in his mind before he began to write it. The mechanical fact that it ultimately

appeared as four long novels, a tale of more than four thousand printed pages, was immaterial to him. He knew what he wanted to write and worked hard at it.

Wolfe, says Aswell, wrote whatever part of the saga it moved him on any particular day to undertake. He wrote scenes several different ways. He rewrote until he had pinned down what he knew was true and right, which dispels the popular illusion that Wolfe poured out millions of words without revision. And he saved everything he wrote, dumping it into two big packing cases. To put a Wolfe book together was a process of removing from these cases the sections of his work which would form the novel at hand, and then joining the sections. Amazingly, Aswell reports, these varied pieces, sometimes written years apart, went together like a jigsaw puzzle.

This explains the unevenness of his work; it explains why *The Web and the Rock* falls into two distinct

¹ \$2.50. Harper's.

halves, each in a different style. For Wolfe strove earnestly until he died to write even better than he did. At the end, he had achieved a true creativeness lacking in his earlier work; he had refined his style; he had found himself and was ready to do the greater things he most certainly would have done.

The stories in *The Hills Beyond*, extracted from the waist-high pile of manuscript Wolfe left behind him, are excellent illustrations for Aswell's valuable critical commentary. "The Lost Boy," first story in the book, is a fine piece which deals, on four separate levels, with the death of Tom's brother Grover in St. Louis, an incident touched briefly in *Look Homeward, Angel*. "Chickamauga" is a first-person Civil War reminiscence by one of Eugene Gant's Pentland relatives, hitherto un-introduced, and it is, as Aswell says, one of the best stories Wolfe ever wrote.

There are other essays and stories of unequal merit in the book, including the magnificent essay on loneliness called "God's Lonely Man" which was published in THE AMERICAN MERCURY under another title. The name piece comprises the major part of the book and perhaps the best part because

it indicates the kind of thing Wolfe would have been able to produce had he lived. Written near the end of his life, it is a story told with a comparative economy of words, an objective simplicity which is quite remote from his earlier lyricism. Some readers, of whom I am one, will prefer Wolfe as poet, but it is undeniable that this final style of his has a solid drive to it which displays unsuspected objective power. Furthermore, as Aswell says, it is a work of pure imagination. It answers forever those critics who claim that Wolfe would have nothing to say once he had finished with himself and his family.

Aswell frequently compares Wolfe to James Joyce but it is possible to find an even closer resemblance to Marcel Proust. Wolfe had Proust's virtually unlimited capacity for observation and the "feel" of things, and a similar tremendous power of recall. But he had something else that Proust partly lacked: a feeling of brotherhood with the people he wrote about which gives to his books a fine-textured humanity.

Thomas Wolfe despised the critical minds who hail every new writer as an equal of Tolstoi, Balzac, or any one of the established immortals. He expounds this idea

with an acid sharpness in "Portrait of a Literary Critic," which also first appeared in *THE AMERICAN MERCURY*. Nevertheless, on the basis of his lifetime's work, now complete in this present volume, I think it is no exaggeration to say that Wolfe will certainly be recorded as one of the great American writers and may well occupy a prominent place in the history of world literature. He possessed the realism of the realists, the poetry of the poets and his genius encompassed the individual talents of all his gifted contemporaries. He stands above these lesser writers as the blue hills rise timeless and lonely over his native city.



Three Books on Germany

BY

PRINCE HUBERTUS ZU LOEWENSTEIN

Two books by young Americans, Ernest R. Pope and William Russell, and one by a German, Fritz Thyssen, have just been published on the Nazi enigma. The first two would never have been written had not the author of the third paid Hitler into power.

I Paid Hitler,² by Fritz Thyssen, is a revealing book. While German workers, burghers and intellectuals

stood by the Republic and believed it secure, while Parliament and the electorate still had clear Republican majorities, betrayal set in from above. That Fritz Thyssen, the Rhenish industrialist, regretted at the end of his life that he paid Hitler will not bring back the millions of dead for whom he, more than any other man, is responsible. What he regrets was not that he destroyed the Weimar Republic and brought misery to Germany and the world, but that the man he paid turned out to have ideas of his own. Had the Nazis crushed only the democratic Constitution, the Republican parties and social legislation, instead of putting heavy industry under State control, he would still be their ardent supporter.

The utter lack of political understanding in his circles is perhaps the most astonishing revelation of this book. Because he believed that some day there might arise a Communist danger, then a most improbable event as all students of contemporary Germany agree, Fritz Thyssen, allegedly a good Catholic, threw the tremendous power he possessed behind the gang leader from Braunau-on-the-Inn.

The book is valuable for the many items of inside information it contains. The almost unbelieva-

² \$2.75. Farrar and Rinehart.