



From Here to Nowhere

CHANDLER BROSSARD

I'LL have to admit that I had almost decided not to read *From Here to Eternity* until a literary man I know, whose opinions I often take quite seriously, soberly told me the other day that it was a major contribution to American literature. My reasons for not wanting to tangle with the book, to be sure, were personal and arbitrary: the size of it staggered me, the advance publicity worked on me like the click click of a time bomb hidden somewhere in my bedroom, making me want to run away; the descriptions of it in all the reviews, made it sound like exactly the kind of book that would bore me, so many people shouted its praises that I decided it couldn't be really good if so many people liked it, and

finally so many people had written about it I felt that between them they had probably said everything about the book that it was possible to say, so why should I bother this late in the day.

However, I followed my friend's advice and plunged into the book. I have just returned from this long journey and I want to let my friend know that it will be a long time before I let him again lead me astray against my better instincts. I submit herewith a few random notes I made while plodding, stumbling, hacking, breast-stroking my way through Mr. Jones' jungle.

First of all, it is not a major contribution to American literature. I think that what made my friend

babble as he did was the fact that here was a book about army life written not by a literary man, an intellectual, but by a "primitive," one of the common men himself. What this man had to say about the Army would therefore be the real McCoy, not some nonsense dreamed up by an alienated, snobbish, over-educated young man whose observations and ideas were formed before he even saw the army. (My friend mentioned *The Naked and the Dead*, which to him was the paragon of a nonsensical, unoriginal literary man's point of view.)

Now it is quite possible that this situation — an ordinary, untypical man wanted to *write a book* about his experiences — might produce something remarkable, deeply valid, and new. If this hypothetical man had been exposed to relatively little literature, and had thus escaped its lure of imitation, he would, perhaps, in his very ignorance and intensity, produce a whole new language (instead of the usual literary language) to express a whole new set of reactions to life which could not be expressed by the symbols and viewpoints employed by most professional writers. He would write as the sufferer purifying himself through expression — in the manner of a visionary — and not as someone self-consciously exposing himself to something unnatural to him just so that he could write about it — in the manner of an adventurous social

service worker.

He might then produce something on the order of Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, that modern odyssey of humiliation and despair. (What amazes you about Celine — and I guess what should amaze you about our successful hypothetical "primitive" — is that, being so profoundly, so overwhelmingly close to and aware of meanness, drudgery, and mediocrity, so much himself a product of it, he was able ever to write at all. As Trotsky said of him: "He writes like a man who has stumbled across human language for the first time.") But *From Here to Eternity* fails on this point. Jones may well be a primitive, and, given the unusual circumstances of his life, it may have been possible for him to write a masterful book on the army, but instead of hacking out his own style, and putting together his very own philosophy, he relentlessly beats you over the head with a combination of mannerisms, gestures, styles, ideas of Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, journalese, John O'Hara, *The New York Times* editorial page, movies, and God only knows what else, gathered and mixed with an unusually aggressive crudity.

HERE AND THERE I did run across something new and unexpected about army life and the weird, disconnected types of men who make up that life in peacetime, but as far as I am concerned, the book as a

whole stacks up as an unwieldy set of notes and not a successful and creative presentation of a new area. I believe it was our own Melville (to whom one critic feverishly compared Jones) who pointed out, long, long ago, that a book cannot stand alone on the fact that there is a lot of unusual information in it, but there must also be an unusual sensibility to handle it.

By and large the characters in the book aroused either frustration or confusion in me. For instance, I thought that Prewitt, the central character (and I suppose written in the author's image) was unquestionably one of the bleakest characters in modern fiction. I have no doubt that author Jones intended him to be a sympathetic, sensitive, tragic figure and that his final death — being machinegunned by mistake in the sand trap of a golf course while returning to the life he loved — was a monstrous, ironic mistake on society's part, that here was a man of real quality and possibility whom a cruel society was overlooking in its mad rush to glorify the crumbs of this life.

Nonsense.

Prewitt was an oaf, plain and simple, and his demise was properly oafish. His behavior with the prostitute — and this part really killed me, the sweet boy falling in love with the prostitute — was neither interesting, typical, neurotic, or anything like that. It was so irritating

and dumb, so ghoulishly persistent in its wrongness, that I would not have been surprised — rather pleased in fact — if this poor hard-working, long-suffering lady had bumped him off herself just to get rid of him. Why in heaven's name *did* she put up with him? Certainly not out of any love she could have dredged up out of that shallow, douche-washed reef called her soul. It must have been something the head doctors would have to explain.

Prewitt wasn't too bad when he was sassing his fellow slaves: these sections were quite good; but when he shifted into high and began his *interior dialogues on the deep complex problems of life* he was like a five-year-old desperately trying to build a suspension bridge with a set of blocks. I'm aware, as I say this, that it is probably just these stretches of desert that must account for the captivation on the faces of all the little girls I see gobbling up the book on subways riding to and from their own gas chambers. Man, this is thinkin, they're saying to themselves. This is real feelin. Deep stuff. All this stuff is the author talking, not some poor goof who had to go into the army because he didn't know how to do anything better. And this is the phony material in the book.

I was so bewildered by the thinking and the carryings on of the major's wife that when I tried discussing her with my wife, I found, in

desperation, that I had to make up a pattern of behavior in order for her to make any sense at all. Was she a nymphomaniac or was she totally frigid and uninterested in men? Did she really have sex with all those guys? Did she believe all the gibberish she poured out to Warden, or was she just faking because she didn't know what she wanted? What was she up to anyway? At one point I thought of her in connection with the married woman in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, who gave up her life for that absurd, nasty little boy Julien. But at least Stendhal explained her behavior, made clear her confused, tortured motivations.

And then there was that behemoth Bloom, who knocked himself off to everyone's monosyllabic surprise. I couldn't figure this at all (besides being disappointed, because he was one of the very few people in the book whose behavior interested me up to that point). Guys like Bloom just don't kill themselves, despite the fact that he was Jewish, that he had been beaten up by a smaller man, that he had fooled around with the queerries (an almost traditional pastime in the peace-time army, I understand) and that he had been pushed around a little bit in his wanderings through this life. Suicidal types don't operate the way he did, don't have that make-up. In fact, he seemed to have every reason for living — wasn't he headed for a boxing championship

and a promotion?

Two characters in the book whom I did like and found interesting, as far as they were handled, were the Italian boy Maggio and the dreamer Jack Malloy. Maggio was the only truly tragic character in it. Life had really ganged up on Maggio, primarily because he was an Italian in a country that has still refused to assimilate Italians or even accord them the status of human beings. Maggio had real feelings and beneath the superficial coating of snottiness and tough boy acting given him by Mr. Jones, a profound sense of man's inhumanity to man, otherwise he would not have blown his top as he did. What a commentary on life it was when Maggio realized that the only way he could solve his situation, the only way he would be treated decently, was to feign insanity, to utterly strip himself of those very things by which a human being triumphs over the animal.

Malloy was very nearly brought off by Jones, but not quite. The trouble was that he was not given enough of a part in the book to really demonstrate his complex character. He was fascinating, at times, because he had developed into a self-conscious philosophy the strong urge that lived in all the men — the urge to do nothing, to lie still, to let passivity triumph over everything. I was very sorry to see him fade away into vagueness and then eventually into nowhere, just disappear.

THERE IS ONE thing that I will have to concede to Jones, and that is his profound discovery that so long as you have people talking to each other, even in the most idiotic fashion, just saying yes, no, you

don't say so, people will go on reading, page after page. That's how desperate people are these days for the sound of the human voice. Jones' discovery is as epochal as the emergence of Arthur Godfrey.

Recommended

F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work. Edited by Alfred Kazin. World Publishing Co. \$3.00

Essays and reviews on the Wonder Boy of the Twenties. Penetrating, helpful, lively exercise.

Hangsaman. Shirley Jackson. Farrar, Straus and Young. \$3.00

Schizophrenia in a young girl. Obviously a labor of real love, sharp and nasty.

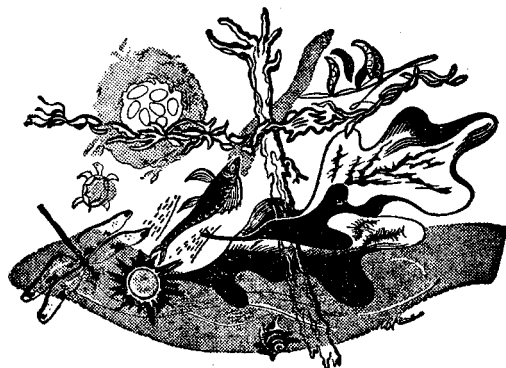
Man and Boy. Wright Morris. Knopf. \$3.00

A real craftsman at work. Funny, true, and quite self-sustaining.

THE MERCURY's regular monthly column, Theatre, by George Jean Nathan, does not appear in this issue. Mr. Nathan is on vacation and will resume his column in the August issue.

Down to Earth

ALAN DEVOE



Woods-Medicine

ONE OF THE hazards of our human mind is that it can persuade us of practically anything. One of the inestimable uses of animals is that, when we take a candid look at them and get to know them well, they restrain our fancies and keep pulling us back down to earth.

If you stay shut up long enough in a garret, or in any sort of philosopher's cubbyhole, and if you start from a couple of nubs of notion and then ratiocinate like mad, you can wind up with a glorious construct of theory that will take eight volumes of exposition, not

counting the footnotes, to set forth. You can show that the earth is flat; or you can stage an intellectual demonstration that the intellect is demonstrably incapable of valid intellection; or you can prove that Bacon wrote the Bible, or perhaps that the Bible is really the Talmud written sideways; or indeed you can make it plain — lots of philosophers have done so — that nothing whatever exists at all, including the author, the reader, or the print that states the argument. You can engage in all this sort of thing, however, only just so long as you don't take to going out into the actual world, living as part of it in its actual day-to-day animal rough-and-tumble under the hot sun, and