

Poetry and Prose

ALAN DEVOE

THIS EARTH OF OURS, as it travels spinning through its baffling journey in space and time, has two kinds of passengers aboard. We may describe them, in one fairly useful and easily alliterative way, as literalists and lyrists. Or, trying it another way, we may divide the company into those who, as it were, take methodical note of the adventure, and those who are in love with it. There are the folk of fact-only, and the ones ensorcerized; there are the just-observers and the ones moved to dionysiac response; there are the quick and the dead. The division may be made in any of a thousand terms, struggling to say the same thing, and indeed has been so made. It is perhaps simplest to say that the life-experience is undergone in prose or in poetry.

This department of the *MERCURY* is not for the discussion of literature, but of what, in library classification,

is called Nature. It is an advantage of the theme called "Nature," however, that in one very real and profound sense "Nature" encompasses the entirety of everything there is. What thing exists that is not a part of nature? A banker as much as a beaver is a species of fauna. "Animals" include not only foxes and woodchucks, but also you, also me. In the stretching universe of all created things, all parts and particles, there is no creaturely object to which we can point and say: That lies outside Nature. In this broadest sense of a word which has many senses, Nature is the totality of what lies open to our inspection as we make our strange journey upon this careering star. Accordingly, every now and then, it is perhaps permissible for a man whose labelled occupation is the contemplating and chronicling of "Nature" to stretch himself a bit in this large room of

meaning. In the snow-blown days of the last of winter, I have been doing some thinking about nature in terms of poetry and prose—in terms, that is, of the two kinds of life-experience, life-response, found among the passengers on our journeying earth—and that is what I want to write about this month. Perhaps it is just the blizzardy grayness of the weather, but I have been entertaining so dense a gloom of spirit that the only chance of possibly getting rid of it is to write it down.

WHAT STARTED THE THING was a book-review. As I have myself lately published a new book, I must be at pains to say that the book under review was not mine. It was, however, what is called a “nature” book, as mine are. It was a book, to be precise, “about birds.” The man who wrote it, clearly, had had his heart lifted and his being set ablaze by the look of a hawk in the high sky, the melting music of a wood thrush in a green glen, the lusty exuberating of the crows that sail down the blustering October winds of New England’s smoky-golden autumns; and so now, as in a shout of celebration, he had written a book about this. He was a man, evidently, of warmly flowing human juices, a man of ardor, such a man as we have been describing, in dividing the company of this earth’s passengers, as one whose spirit leaps in

response to the poetry of the life-adventure.

Very well; he had written this book about birds. (It had better have a name, for handiness. Let’s call it *Skyways*.) Into *Skyways* this bird-bedaft life-lover, this joy-dancing marveller of a bird-enchanted man, had managed to put a large lot of bird-factuality and bird-information, all of it, so far as I know, accurate enough, and much of it arrestingly interesting simply as fact. Plainly, however, it had not been the intention of the writer of *Skyways* to beget a manual of bird-fact. He had not wanted to rest upon *describing* birds; he had wanted to *celebrate* them. He had wanted to pluck the reader by the sleeve, and shake him and dance around him with ecstatic caperings, and direct his gaze upward with shining eyes, and beseech him to join in a shout of “Gloria! Gloria! Mark how that goshawk splits the air like an arrow.” He had wanted to say: “*God*, but it is holy-sweet in this green wood, hearing the wood thrush sing. Come with me, participate and revel. Here is the nest now . . . you see how glory-lit?”

He had wanted to do things like that; for this man was of the company of the lyrical, the life-juiceful, *guillare di Dio*. So he wrote his book. So what became of it? Well, it was a “book about nature,” wasn’t it? More, it was a “book about birds?” And so, of course, it must fall rightly,

for review, within the province of somebody who "knows about birds." The review of *Skyways* which I read the other day — (the blizzard swirling outside, and the sky gray as death, and little likelihood ever of any Spring or any hope) — was written by an ornithologist.

I DON'T KNOW if the author of *Skyways* is an old man or a young one, weary-wise about human be-devilments or still all eager-hearted and innocent as the world's morning. I hope the former, so he has not hanged himself. I don't know, either, whether perhaps his book may have received other reviews, which I have not seen, which may have been written by warm-juiced men, lyrical men, dancing-spirited men, of his own company. I hope there have been such. For if there has been only this ornithologist, and others of that part of this earth's divided company of passengers, to make mention of *Skyways* in reviews . . . It doesn't bear much thinking about.

Here:

"This little book of bird-studies, arranged in haphazard sequence, presents few facts not already familiar to most persons interested in the field. However, even elementary material can be valuable if well organized and carefully handled. The present work is unfortunately marred by habitual use of variant local species-names, and, where formal identifications are made, they often fail to conform to the most recent revisions of the

A.O.U. Checklist. (The Ibid's Sparrow mentioned on page 214 should be Ergo's Sparrow.) In addition the writer, doubtless to be "entertaining", employs an extravagant form of expression. There is no index."

There it is. That's all. The End. So much for *Skyways*, that singing little book out of a singing heart, that merry and worshipful and prankish-happy little piece of print, that celebration. There is no index.

As I said earlier, perhaps it's just the blizzards and the gray sky of these last winter days, but I have been heavily cast down. I have been feeling a sufficiently violent gloom, in fact, to be thinking that possibly what we need is nothing less than an entire revolution in our system of library classification.

It is the present and longstanding custom to classify literary works according to Subject. But really now, I wonder, is this anything more than a kind of fossilized fatuity? It isn't the *subject* that determines what kind of book a book is; what determines that is the spirit of the writer who writes it. And there are two kinds of writers aboard this spinning earth, as there are two kinds of people in general. There are those who describe; and there are those who celebrate; even as, in all ways and walks, there are those who go about methodically taking note and those who go about rhapsodically being in love. *Warbler Sub-Species of Eastern Wisconsin*, as things stand

now, is a "book about birds," and *Skyways*, too, as things stand now, is a "book about birds." This may help to tidy the lives of librarians, but is it sense? May it not move a bird-daft man, who had loved with a great love, to hang himself from the next rafter?

DURING THE LAST few gloomy days I have been prowling around libraries, having a look; and the heart is as lead. They've got Robert Gibbings down as "Travel," I see, a little way along the shelf from something called *Motor Journeys Through New England*. Now Gibbings, as it happens, does some travelling, but if he stayed at home all the time under the bed, his books would be the same sort of thing they are now; which is to say lively and lovely life-affirmations, shouts of glee, lyrical leapings-up of the spirit to the splendor and the fun of the poetry of being. And the *Motor Journeys* man . . . well, I am sure his book is accurate. I am sure it is accurate 'til it aches. Thorough, too. But not in all its pages of well-organized precision is there ever that heart-in-the-throat response to life, that dance-and-howl-under-the-moon delight, that is the mark of one kind of wayfarer through the life-experience and not of another kind. He

has taken notes this man, and sound ones. He has not fallen in love.

That's the way it is under "Travel." It gets worse under "Theology" — the lilting and mischievous life-appreciations of Chesterton cheek-by-jowl with some Church Histories of the kind justly called "exhaustive" and "well-documented." If you look under "Birds" . . . well, I frankly was afraid to look. I don't think I could have borne the sight of *Skyways* there, its small song stilled, its index absent.

What do we do? I don't know. Could we issue all books perhaps with a cover-stamped "S" for Stodgy or "A" for Ardent? Or perhaps, in the manner of faucets, a "C" for the Cold and Chilly and an "H" for the heat of the heart? I don't know. There's nothing really feasible at all, I guess. But I wish there were. For the passengers aboard this planet may be all the same species, but they are not all the same kind; and men are more separate than subjects. Once upon a time there was a man with birds in his heart, and he was full of praise and passion and he wanted to communicate this and share it. I cannot get it out of my head that somewhere, in a locked room, he is at the moment standing with his belt in his hand, meditatively eying a rafter.

Draughts of Old Bourbon

**But
Who**



Does Ike Like?

William Bradford Huie

THERE IS no doubt that a great many Americans like Ike. In fact, it's difficult to imagine an American who dislikes Ike. The general is a splendid fellow — decent and honest and affable — and he has served this country well. Only a misanthrope could work up much of a hate against Eisenhower as a gentleman and a soldier and a patriot.

But as a candidate for the Presidency, there are proper reservations about him. One of the important reservations is expressed in the popular saying: I Might Like Ike If I

Knew What Ike Liked. The election of 1952 is a grim business to many Americans: our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor are involved, and we'd rather not let the election become a beauty, a popularity, or even a personality contest. The issues are far more important than any personality — many citizens yearn to know more about the general's views.

In time perhaps the general will make his views known; meanwhile, there seems to be a second question of almost equal importance. *Who* does Ike like? Who are the men who