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THE BOOK FORUM



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN — Carl Van Doren (Viking, \$3.75).

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THE SECRET LIFE OF A SECRET AGENT — Henry W. Lanier (Lippincott, \$2.50).

ZACA VENTURE — William Beebe (Harcourt, Brace, \$3.00).

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LISTEN! THE WIND — Anne Morrow Lindbergh (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50).

MUSIC SINCE 1900 — Nicholas Slonimsky (Norton, \$4.75).

A COUPLE of hundred years ago a small boy conceived the idea of using a kite as an aid in swimming and, floating on his back, got himself towed a mile across a lake "in a most agreeable manner." Later, become a man and acting as a man and hence not putting away all childish things, he again used a kite. This time he pulled not only himself but mankind a great distance forward in the understanding of electricity.

All that is known of these exploits of Benjamin Franklin and of a thousand other exploits just as ingenious or important Carl Van Doren has assembled in a grand and definitive biography. Every one of his 782 pages is compact and sparkling with the variety and vigor which was this poet, printer, philosopher, bargainer, diplomat, editor, lover, wit, revolutionary, almanacker. Here is the inventor who fashioned pikes for the bayonetless American troops at the very time he sat on the highest councils of the harassed colonies. Here the clubby, charming maneuverer who got much of the foreign aid without which the revolution would have failed.

Still swinging dumbbells for exercise after he was 80, he took part in all the manifold affairs of a life which continued to give him quiet delight. He even lived long enough to help shape the Constitution, mediating throughout the deliberations of the convention — and not attacking the Jews, as the author is at pains to point out, current anti-Semitic propaganda to the contrary. Seldom, indeed, did Franklin attack anything. His mood was one of appreciation, of using, enjoying, planning, expanding. He was a doer,

one whose creations flowed out of a reservoir of ability.

He "moved through his world in a humorous mastery of it. . . . Sometimes, with his marvellous range, in spite of her personal tang, he seems to have been more than any single man: a harmonious multitude."

Best of Franklin's biographers, Mr. Van Doren reflects this harmonious multitude with extraordinary ability and grace.

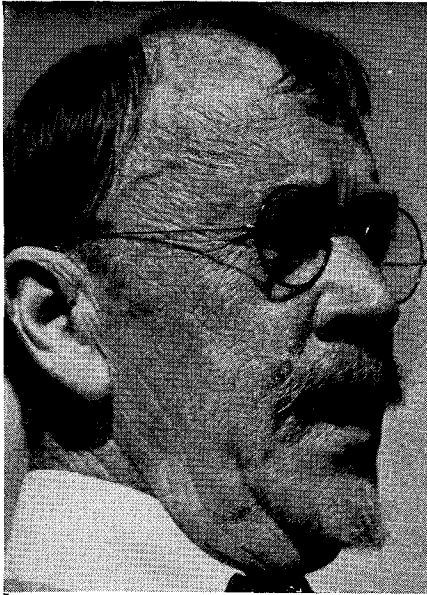
As single-minded as Franklin was versatile, Edwin Arlington Robinson centered his whole industrious life on poetry. He made verses supremely well and, at length, he did find the world rhythmically beating a path to his doorstep. He began to read verse at five, began to write it at eleven; but it took many years and the intercession of the President of the United States before he could support himself by the telling of poetic tales.

His life, most gently and deftly recreated by Hermann Hagedorn in *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, gives all lovers of human personality and poetry something to ponder. How does it happen that a genius, willing and able to entertain the whole world with his mediative, immeasurably beautiful song, can nearly starve? And how did it almost miraculously happen that a young boy caught in Robinson's spell was the son of Theodore Roosevelt, who had the power to become a subsidizer of the arts? The President gave him a post in the customs house, introduced him to a publisher, wrote a critical article in his praise — all this at a time when Robinson spent his soul-killing days as timekeeper on a subway construction job and his hopeless nights haunting the saloons.

Roosevelt's gracious act is now set down by Mr. Hagedorn, who with equal finesse gives us the first full-length portrait of this shy, surprisingly humorous New Englander, a warm, well-written tribute to a major American talent.

A THOROUGHLY delightful and singular volume is *The March of Literature*, in which Ford Madox Ford tells the story of the world's great writing, up to our own times. It must be said that the marching goes a little ragged when he gets close to home; and it would have been a happier book that ended at the twentieth century's swarming borderline. But, when he writes of the more spacious past, Mr. Ford is superb.

In the informal manner of a roving



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correspondent, this amiable and immensely learned gentleman makes his way through the ages, dispatching his impressions of the state of letters. It is exactly as if he had just come from a long interview with Herodotus or Chaucer or Lao-tse, so humanly and personally does he extract them from their tenebrous past. Intense attachments or aversions mingle with his often shrewd and objective criticism. He would himself have garroted Cervantes in prison if he could have prevented *Don Quixote*, which he thinks a monstrosity of literary evil. Or he would sacrifice his reputation for some half-forgotten lovely poet of Provence. He gossips of Roman politics, of Shakespeare the businessman; he pokes fun at giants. And he might have been describing himself when he says of Gibbon that the man "writes as if he were throwing at you pieces of his own heart."

SOMEWHERE in his rich past, Henry W. Lanier met an international spy who broke down and told his story. Ghost writing for this anonymous acquaintance, Mr. Lanier has made *The Secret Life of a Secret Agent* a book that will cut in on the sleeping time of the more imaginative mystery addicts.

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THAT genial and tireless explorer, William Beebe, has been to sea again, this time aboard the schooner *Zaca* in waters off Lower California. As always, he has come back with an enchanting bookful of the discoveries plus anecdotes he has a gift for picking up on even the bleakest shore or laddling from the most commonplace lagoon.

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With a Foreword and
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