

# “When Icicles Hang by the Wall”

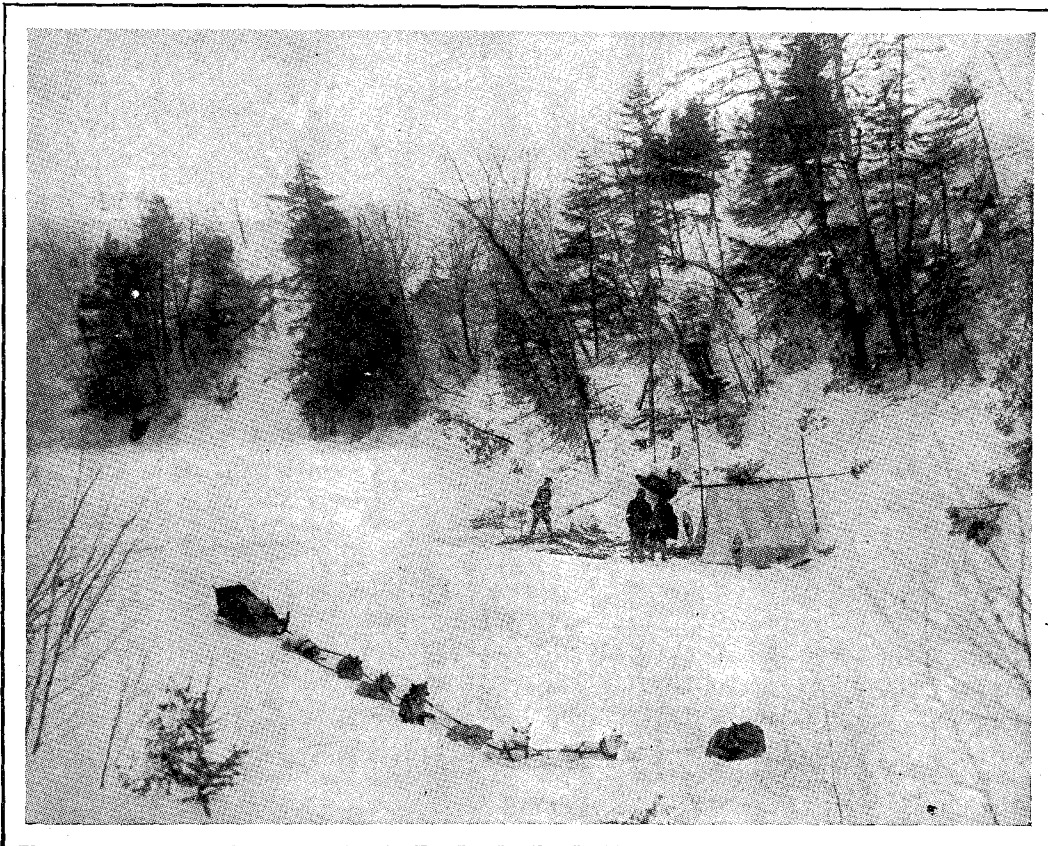


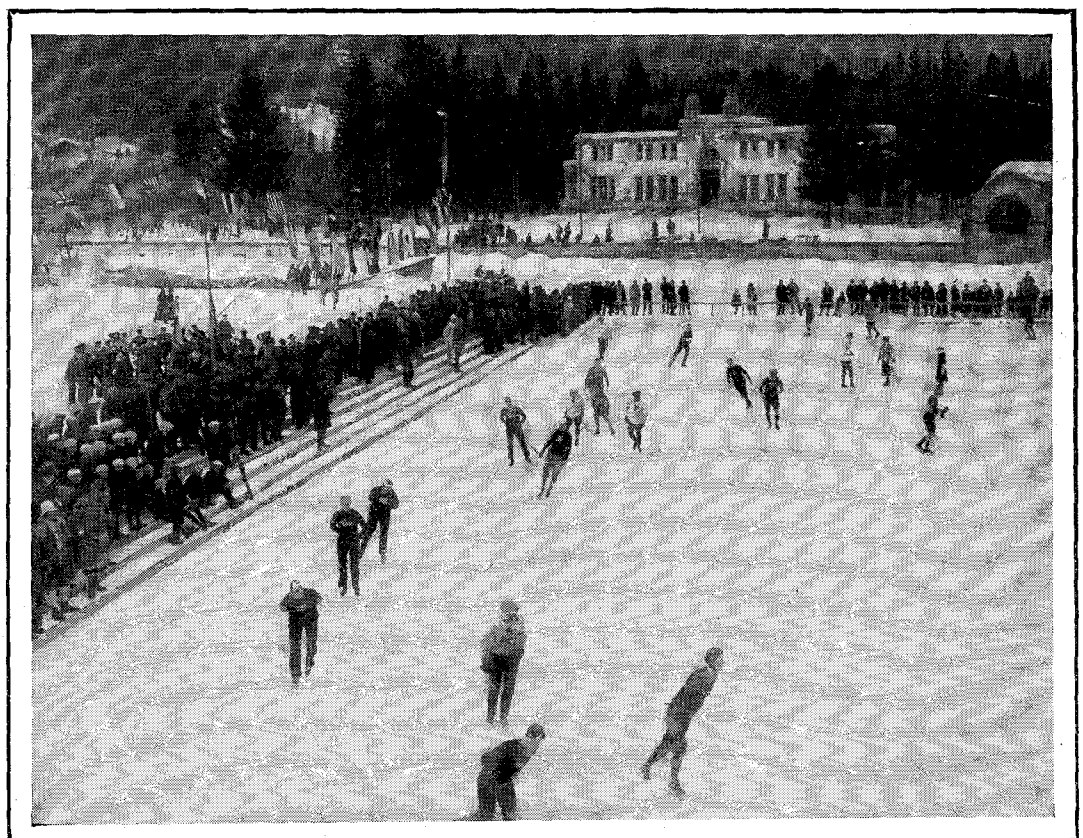
Photo by Edwin Levick

## Canadian Trappers Making Camp for the Night near Quebec

The dogs are having their “off duty” hour, while the men do the work. The dogs seem to like their present job

## The Olympic Games at Chamonix, France

Skaters are here seen limbering up on the rink, a day or two after the opening ceremonies. The United States failed to carry off first honors save in one event



P. & A. Photos



# The Book Table

## The New Poetry

By JOHN ERSKINE

THIS handsome volume<sup>1</sup> of some four hundred pages is a revision and a reconsideration of Mr. Untermeyer's "New Era in American Poetry," published some six years ago. About that time, to the regret of those admirers who, like the present reviewer, think Mr. Untermeyer's unusual gifts are for creating poetry rather than for criticising it, he made himself one of the most vigorous and generous champions of what has been called the New Poetry, saying always the best possible word for it, and trying, as it seemed, to give even the eccentric voices their fair chance to be heard. This kind of propaganda has its place in art; we have been familiar in other days with the critic as advocate—with Ruskin, for instance. We could quarrel with Mr. Untermeyer only when his desire to make the New Poets seem important led him to run down their predecessors; it was as though he suspected in his heart that the new things could not compete with the old in an open and unprejudiced field.

This revised volume, however, is offered to us as more than propaganda; it attempts to be real criticism, an estimate of accomplishment after deliberate second thought. I cannot see how we are to accept such a book with the same indulgence with which we listened to the earlier advocacies. It is one thing to plead that every poet should have a sympathetic hearing, and quite another thing to say, after he has had the hearing, what is the significance of his work. Hospitality needs no standards—it is perhaps easier to be hospitable in art if we have no standards; but criticism without standards is unintelligible. The ideal critic would find his standards in the nature of art and in the conditions of fame; he would seek a guide to his personal taste in the experience of the race. Mr. Untermeyer thinks this kind of criticism too ideal to attain, and perhaps it is; he would rather accept as the basis of criticism what will always be a large part of it—the temperament of the critic. But even the frankly temperamental critic, if he would be intelligible, must have his personal standards, must state his likes and dislikes with some consistency, must keep, that is, a kind of

unity within his own temperament, if he would speak to us as one critic rather than as several. I must confess that Mr. Untermeyer seems to me, in this book, any number of critics, or no critic at all. I find no central point of view from which to orient myself in this series of appreciations. And I resent the imposition of critical manner upon this confusion of unreasoned judgments.

In the Introduction, for example, we read: "The New England poets had withdrawn into their libraries; Longfellow, Bryant, Taylor turned their tired eyes from the troubled domestic scene to a rose-tinted Europe, transported themselves to a prettified past, abandoned original writing for translation and other methods of evasion. . . . It was a more vigorous Muse, lovelier as well as livelier, that Whitman invoked when he cried out in protest against those who were seeking glamour not in man's life but in other men's books." This is a little staggering when we consider to what an extent translation, parody, and "other methods of evasion" have occupied the New Poets, Mr. Untermeyer included; but the reader adjusts himself and concludes that theoretically at least Mr. Untermeyer likes the poetry that is inspired by life rather than by books. The reader is confirmed in this conclusion by what is said in general of Robert Frost's poems. Yet when we get to the chapter on Miss Lowell and to the discussion of "Can Grande's Castle," which Mr. Untermeyer likes, the reader must adjust himself once more, for this book, like most of Miss Lowell's work, is as far from America of to-day as ever a New England poet transported himself, and the agile critic manages to praise her for that fact. "Possibly the strangest thing about this energetic book is that it is actually taken from other books. . . . By using Aldington's phrase as her title, Miss Lowell lets us understand that the contents of the new volume are the result of what she has read. But in the writing her reading becomes real; her creative excitement makes what she has got from history books far livelier than her life. It is obvious that she could not possibly have experienced these things. Their vividness is due to the fact that, thrown back into the past, either by the war (as Miss Lowell claims), or, as is more probable, by a subconscious

search for fresh material, an artist has taken a list of dates, battles, proper names, together with Rand McNally's Geography, and vitalized them. It is this objective and dramatic sense that makes her audience feel the reality of her historical revaluations just as it makes Miss Lowell declare, 'Living now in the midst of events greater than these, the stories I have dug out of dusty volumes seem as actual as my own existence.'" Mr. Untermeyer's point of view now seems to be that any material, ancient or modern, is proper for poetry; the question is only whether it is made into good poetry. This is the traditional view, and the use of it earlier in his book would have saved us from the unnecessary slights on the men who wrote "Hiawatha," "Evangeline," and "Thanatopsis." But we are staggered again at the explanation of the recourse to old material; just think how Mr. Untermeyer would comment on Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra:" "It is obvious that the poet could not have experienced these things. The vividness of the play is due to the fact that, thrown back into the past, either by the recent Armada, or, as is more probable, by a subconscious search for fresh material, an artist has read Plutarch (North's Translation) and has vitalized the dusty book." The same explanation would be given for the Iliad. Yet perhaps, as some of us have thought, the poets write of what they are interested in, of the world they live in, and they usually live in a world of imagination, where Cleopatra and Helen are not of the past. Miss Lowell needs no defense or explanation for living in a world larger than Brookline, Massachusetts; the explanations should be devoted to those of the New Poets who limit their art to a locality and to the present moment. And the implication that poets come on their world of beauty by reacting from something, by backing away from something they don't like, is highly debatable; most of us believe that love rather than hate is the creating principle, and that his love of the world he lives in, of his imaginative world, rather than his dislike of actual existence, inspires the poet to create admirable things.

What Mr. Untermeyer says about poetic language is equally baffling, and, it seems to me, equally inconsistent. From the early pages of his book one gathers that poetry ought to be written in colloquial language rather than in any diction that might be thought literary or antique. Naturally, then, he will praise

<sup>1</sup> American Poetry Since 1900. By Louis Untermeyer. Henry Holt & Co., New York. \$3.50.