

Outlook

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Mencken

By CAMERON ROGERS

HENRY L. MENCKEN, editor of the "American Mercury," has been, for a period of roughly twenty years, a force in American letters. For the ten years just past he has been more than that. He has, in himself, composed, almost indisputably, the most powerful critical influence at work in this country, and certainly that one most constantly discussed, combatted or applauded. He has been variously estimated. To the late Stuart P. Sherman, for example, he was a critic for flappers. To Edmund Wilson he is a genuine artist. To Frank Harris, one of the best critics in English; to Carl Van Doren, a writer resembling in some fashion Poe, Whitman and Mark Twain; to Burton Rascoe, a natural product of American traditions, training and character; to the Irishman, Vincent O'Sullivan, a product as American as pumpkin pie or a Riker drug store; and to L. M. Hussey, a writer who is primarily emotional and creative, and so, therefore, primarily an artist.

He has, in other words, possessed and administered in his critical writing so individual and vital a personality that contemporaries have been unable to pigeon-hole him or gauge to their satisfaction the precise sphere of his influence and the validity of his opinions. During the last decade Mencken has constantly defied those who would explain him, catalogue him and so spike his guns. His strength has been his non-conformity, his brawling disagreement with accepted canons of American life, customs and behavior, and until recently this strength had remained undiminished. Now, however, it is

Henry Louis Mencken, discoverer and baiter of the booboisie, has been variously identified in the quarter century of his public career as one with Lucifer and the savior of rut-bound, sentimental America. Mr. Rogers, biographer of Whitman, Colonel Bob Ingersoll and others, concludes that however great his influence in the past, Mencken's work is now finished. His opinions no longer startle; his invective no longer arouses. He has become a prophet with honor in his own country, and the respect of his countrymen marks his decline as a critical power in the land

definitely impaired and for two reasons. One is that he has been accepted and his protestant clamor no longer attracts an attention either startled or reverent. The other, that he has done his work, and having written with an admirable emphasis of things about which he knows a great deal, he now either chooses, or is forced, or both, to write of things about which he knows very little.

In his time Mencken has constituted, for many intelligent people, a sovereign formative influence. But his time is very nearly past because the premises of his prosecutions have become too familiar, and a rising generation will persist in regarding him not as an enlightened Ishmael bawling wisdom in the waste places of American boobery, but as a quite orthodox, though still forceful, editor with a failing for repetition. For a prophet to be with honor in his own country means the end of that prophet as a prophet. Mencken is just such a one. The Shermans, the Munsions and the Calvertons, the Pattees and the Boyntons have ceased to strive with him and so have ceased to impel him to a greater, more raucous and more

inspiring diapason of ridicule. He will continue to uncover in American life those preposterous beliefs, shibboleths and manners at which he has been mocking for years but in so doing he will no longer occasion amazement. For he has taught too many pupils to observe these things for themselves, and he has taught them so thoroughly that they no longer require his schooling.

However it is not yet to be inferred that Mencken is, quite hopelessly, a spent man. If there ever be in the United States a national prohibition of tobacco, for instance, or a Constitutional instrument forbidding the further glorification of the American girl as directed by revue producers, his voice may again be raised in all its ancient plenitude and with all its ancient epithets of scorn. But, unfortunately, it seems quite likely that in that time there will be voices younger and stronger, voices compact with an invective perhaps even more rigorous than his own, so that, in the main, his usefulness is at an end.

But let us, in the light of all this, a light which would seem to reveal an epitaph, examine his career.

HE WAS BORN in Baltimore in 1880, educated at Knapp's Institute and the Baltimore Polytechnic, and he was inducted into professional journalism at the age of nineteen. He served as a cub reporter on the Baltimore "Herald" and his first printed piece of reporting was the following terse statement of fact:

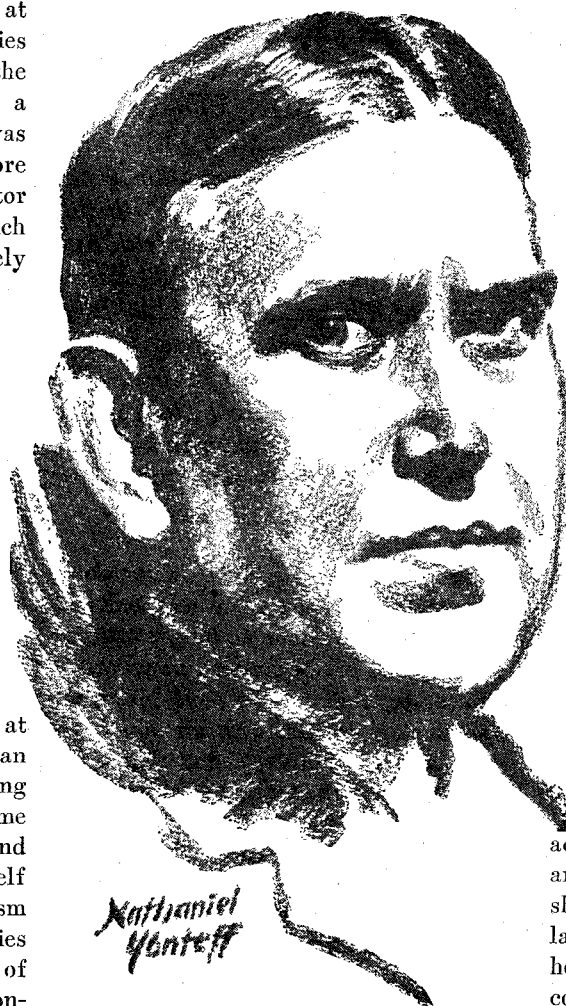
"At Otterheim Memorial, United Brethren Church, Roland and Fifth

Avenue, Hampden, Charles H. Stanley and J. Albert Loose entertained a large audience last night with an exhibition of war scenes by a cineograph." An item which, taken in relation to his now notable phobias, seems filled with a gentle irony. This was in 1899. In 1900 he contributed a few short stories to magazines such as "Leslie's," and Ellery Sedgwick, then conducting that periodical, was so favorably impressed by one that he offered Mencken the post of associate editor. Mencken, refusing this, became Sunday editor of the Baltimore "Herald" in 1901, city editor in 1903, managing editor in 1904 and editor-in-chief in the following year at the age of five and twenty. His abilities were so manifest that when in 1906 the Baltimore "Herald," to employ a graphic idiom, "folded up," he was appointed news editor of the Baltimore "Evening News," then Sunday editor of the Baltimore "Sun," during which latter employment he emerged definitely from comparative obscurity in the rôle of the militant and always audible critic. It was during this period that he commenced to fall upon what he considered to be the frauds of the day. He laughed at the New Theatre idea then sprouting in New York, giped at Richard Mansfield and engaged to cry up the dramatic talents of George Bernard Shaw.

Almost at once people began to read his work, a few with applause, a great many with frequently expressed distaste. In 1908, at the suggestion of Theodore Dreiser, an author in whose behalf he has long battled with adverse opinion, he became literary critic of the "Smart Set" and for the next six years applied himself with his peculiar gusto, here to criticism of books, there to that of personalities and to that of the orthodox texture of American life everywhere. He conducted a column in the Baltimore "Sun" entitled "The Free Lance" and instantly aroused an opposition that would have appalled a less resolute character. Mencken fed on opposition, probed, flayed, laughed coarsely and wooed enemies. He made no effort to enlist a following and of course, secured one, but one which, fortunately, remained small as compared to the foe. In 1914, with George Jean Nathan, whom he had met and with whom he had formed a friendship four years earlier, he became joint editor of the "Smart Set" and as such, during the next ten years, achieved his fullest sig-

nificance as a critical influence not only in American letters but in an increasing degree in American life. In 1924 he was instrumental in founding the "American Mercury" and became its editor, and since 1924 has become less and less the spokesman of an intelligently caustic minority, and more and more the accepted and almost supreme arbiter of men and women whose mental processes he has now ceased any more to astonish.

Here briefly and in rough chronology is the substance of Mencken's career. He is still a young man but he raised his voice when he was, comparatively



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speaking, so very young, and he has used it so consistently, that he has already given us his all, told us all he knows, taught us all that he has to teach. For there can and should be no such thing in the world as a sound critic of life in its every aspect, and to function as just such an agent of the Omniscient Intelligence is palpably his present ambition. Indeed, it is the only sign that he gives of approaching fifty. While his writing, as his biographer, Isaac Goldberg, points out, remains that of a young man, the subjects upon

which he employs it balk at conclusive treatment. His mind's eye, trained once upon specific evils, frauds and follies, seeks now to encompass the whole hodge-podge of universal errors, and these are too diffuse, too complex, too vague in his own understanding, to permit success. One may concisely trace the progress of this abandonment of an impregnable position for one which does not exist at all, in the six volumes entitled "Prejudices," and which contain, the first of them, the best work of his "Smart Set" days, and the last of them, his still vigorous but increasingly meaningless disquisitions on "The Nature of Man," "Government," "The Nature of Love" and the like. These, written, it is true, as only he can write, are not meaningless save for one cardinal reason. They are not incoherent or unintelligent or dull. They are meaningless simply because Mencken knows very little more about any of them than do his readers and about some of them, it is quite possible, rather less.

When he took a specific man or book and built around such a subject an edifice of shrewd comment, sometimes devastating but frequently excellent criticism, and always revealing statement, he was as nearly infallible as any critic can be, and more inspiring, infinitely more influential and effective. If you will look into the first volume of these "Prejudices" you will find estimates of H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, George Ade and others which, judged by any but a purely academic standard of criticism, surpass any kindred work of these times. They shocked many critics, even surprised the late Stuart P. Sherman, himself, before he came to New York, an excellent commentator upon letters, into a pallid satire of rebuke, but they will outlive far more pretentious critiques, even, perhaps, far more scholarly ones, because of a vitality and fierce perception elsewhere unequaled in this generation.

It has been authoritatively stated that Mencken is not a literary critic at all but a critic of his times in all their manifestations. This, to precisely this extent, is true. He is not, *sui generis*, a literary critic such as, let us say, was Hazlitt. Nor is he, however, *sui generis*, a critic of his times. In him the functions of both are so nicely combined as to achieve a double result. For an author or a book or even a public figure

such as was the late William Jennings Bryan is the glass through which he looks at his times, examines their magnified defects and assumes his conclusions. Remove that author, or that book, or that personage, and he stares at a landscape too vast to be comprehended by any human critical retina, too sprawling, too general for any instructive scrutiny. Through his glass he has been able to particularize, to concentrate upon one social malady, expose its symptoms, prescribe for them and pass on to another. But without his glass he is lost. He sees everything and at the same time nothing, and so is able to diagnose with no more authority than might the authors of those very evils which he would cauterize with the hot iron of his mockery. Mencken, writing objectively, and with a specific target for his criticism, has been an important influence upon the development of the contemporary American mind. Writing subjectively upon general human problems he has been and will remain, ineffective.

IT IS significant, here, to observe that it was when he ceased to be Mencken the Maverick and became the bellwether of the herd, that he translated himself from one critical see to the other. When, ten or fifteen years ago, he pointed out to an outraged majority that H. G. Wells, who had once been "the most brilliant, if not always the most profound, of contemporary English novelists," had yielded to a "process of gradual and obscure decay" he awoke hard feelings but also many intelligent readers to the realization that Wells had, in fact, been of late producing novels which were not only dull but pitifully commonplace. It is true that he did not at once materially damage Wells's American sales, but he bred a severe disaffection in the ranks, incited a rebellion in many minds, to the touted clap-trap of once talented but now empty English authors. Ten or fifteen years ago the attitude of American criticism toward Wells or Bennett was an attitude not critical in the least. Men acutely perceptive to the faults of American authors reviewed "Mr. Britling Sees It Through" and abased themselves before its very ordinary qualities as though the hand of God had wrought them. Mencken, though his work in this respect has been far from completely successful, changed all this. In a word, he was honest. Instead of writing testimonials he wrote criticisms and that he should dare to do so caused such

men as Stuart P. Sherman to look upon him as an intolerable boor, and that class of readers of which Sherman was the spokesman, then by far the largest in the country, to do likewise. But, in the minds of a few, Mencken had sown the seed. While Sherman did all the thinking for his flock, Mencken taught his to think for themselves. And since Sherman was not a critic of contemporary letters at all, but a man of sound scholarship merely in the tradition of letters, he actually impeded the development of individual critical thought while Mencken cried it on.

BUT AT THAT TIME Mencken was the Maverick and he continued so to be with every clay ikon that he smashed and every false standard of excellence that he attacked. And also he continued, and more and more perceptibly, to mold the minds of a group of men and women which grew larger year by year. His ultimate reception by the herd was the inevitable result, and almost coincidentally he renounced objective criticism, threw away his glass, and assumed the conduct of the Omniscient. It is not, of course, inconceivable that such an action was forced upon him by the fact that of late years he has had very little at which to swing. When the occasion arises, when, as happened in 1925, he has a Bryan at which to shoot, he is again Mencken the Maverick. But with this distinction. Ten or fifteen years ago he was a Maverick to Stuart P. Sherman's army of bottle-fed intelligences. Today he is a Maverick only to an army which is bereft of any intelligences at all. Yesterday he at least had intelligences with which to work. The trouble is that he worked with them too well and showed too many of them the light. Today he can be of no more use because there remain too few who still deny him.

Mencken's writing, the prose style which has been his weapon, has remained, it is gratifying to observe, comparatively unaffected by his critical apotheosis. This style, like its possessor, made enemies, awoke at one time a considerable academic uproar and a strange disquiet even in the breasts of his warmest admirers. At its best it is clear, forceful and witty. At its worst it is boisterous, affected, and sometimes in bad taste judged by any standards of writing. Stuart P. Sherman, whose opinions touching style were always sound, esteemed it as being hard, pointed, forcible and cocksure. It is, certainly, all of that. Its faults, in

point of fact, are few and candid. Like his friend and one-time co-editor, George Jean Nathan, Mencken has a weakness, more, a vice, for needlessly interpolating into his prose a variety of German expressions which add nothing to emphasis of content and which constitute so naïve an effect of sophomoric cleverness as to astound readers who revere his abilities. If these expressions were French instead of German how palpable would seem the absurdity of their usage by an otherwise first-rate author writing in the English language. The fact that they are in a tongue for some reason considered less precious by the herd somewhat diminishes the mischief, but only in the case of his unilingual admirers who, if they possess any feeling for good writing, will still object. Mencken, it would seem, cannot write police when he means police. He must write Polizei. If he would refer to scholars a mysterious compulsion directs that he write Gelehrten. Does he wish to speak of the Home for the Aged? then he puts hand to dictionary and plucks out Greisenheim. Or if he would make use of the word employment or would simply mention the day's work, the same obscure inhibition forbids him to put on paper the English word and he inscribes *Geschäft* instead. He has actually disfigured an otherwise delightful essay on Huneker by hammering into the opening paragraph the word *Doppelschraubenschnellpostdampfer*, and why? Merely to avoid the necessity of writing twin-screw mail packet. Such a procedure makes, of course, for an effect at once ridiculous and uncouth and is, if you like, the worst flaw in his style. But save for an occasional abuse of such expressions as *pish-posh*, and a sometimes tedious reiteration of such nomenclature as *Homo Boobians*, *Boobus Americanus* and the rest of that familiar terminology, it would be hard to find another.

INDEED, as a medium of satire, invective or praise, Mencken's style has no equal, even today when he has nothing more about which to write and has fallen back upon subjects to the exposition of which no style might lend a reasonable coherence or a tolerable validity. It is not polished. It is frequently ungraceful. It is as bare of ornament as is an elm of leaves in January. But it remains as memorable as the date of one's birthday, and most especially does it so remain to those men

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Foreign Opinion

The Election Seen from Abroad

By MALCOLM W. DAVIS

AMERICANS have voted for more prosperity. What does it mean to us? That is the conclusion that England and Europe appear to draw from the election of Hoover, and the question about it that they naturally ask. Their attention turns, of course, to three points: How will the outcome affect arrangements about payment of war damages and war debts? How will it affect trade? How will it affect the policy of the United States toward Europe in such matters as peace treaties and disarmament? And they see little reason to expect changes in American policy on any of these, or developments favorable to the desires and interests of Europeans.

Great Britain, on the whole, seems to welcome the prospect of Hoover's accession to power. British publicists and statesmen feel that there is a basis of understanding with him, not only because of his services during and after the war but because of his residence in England and in other parts of the British Empire. Yet, as the London "Times" remarks, it was in great measure the bizarre personality of Smith that aroused in Great Britain more interest in this Presidential election than in any other in years.

A man more familiar with other nations and with their peoples than any previous President, continues the "Times," is to guide American foreign policy during the coming four or more years—a period "of critical interest for the British peoples and of high promise, as they hope, for further adjustment of their own and American interests to a common point of view and common purpose. Both have 1931 before them and the second Washington Conference as a fixed point in their calendars."

Both the "Daily Mail" and the "Daily Express" extend laudatory welcome to the new President. It was left to the "Daily Herald," organ of the Labor Party, to observe acutely: "Why should the average American kill a Republican Government to make way for a Democratic Government when the difference between them is negligible? Smith's defeat is at bottom judgment of the American electorate upon the unreality of American politics. The Republicans may as well stay in

office until there is some reason for displacing them. Very emphatically the Democratic Party is not a reason."

Disappointment—or at least a kind of foreboding—touches the mood of French opinion on the election. This is because a change in the attitude of the United States is what most Frenchmen desire; they see no chance for that with Hoover and thought they saw a chance for it with Smith. Also French interests were hoping for the possibility of a wider and legitimate market in the United States for their wines.

"No use in searching deeply for the reason of Hoover's success," is apparent to the semi-official "Temps" of Paris. "It lies in the desire of Americans to safeguard their prosperity at all costs . . ."

"It is a natural deduction that the Presidency of Hoover will be a logical continuation of that of Coolidge and that the doctrines of Coolidge on war debts, disarmament, organization of peace and interference in the affairs of the Latin American states will prevail tomorrow as they did yesterday."

A GUARANTEE against adventurers, against anarchy," the Royalist Catholic "Action Francaise" calls the election of Hoover, adding picturesquely, "and against the Latin spirit which over there passes for the spirit of the devil." And the "Echo de Paris" jeers (somewhat anxiously and inaccurately): "One hundred and twenty million Americans grouped behind a mining engineer who up to now has reasoned only in calories and kilowatts. It may be disconcerting."

A note of alarm is sounded by the radical organ "L'Œuvre" which says: "We shall see the Monroe Doctrine pushed even further to put Latin American countries in tutelage. We shall see a still more bitter fight to attain naval parity with England. Europe will appear more and more a distant colony for the sale of goods and the lending of money. Even if the bankers in America who make their living by such operations help to mobilize reparation bonds, the linking of war debts and reparations will become even more difficult. In reality, to treat with

Americans drunk with their wealth and power we have need of a united Europe."

Germany, with the exception of the extreme radical and reactionary papers, is inclined to greet Hoover's victory cordially. The "Berliner Zeitung" hails him as "the man who supplied starving Germany with food after the war." The Catholic Centre Party organ "Germania" thinks: "Hoover, sovereign dictator of an economic system and brilliant organizer, assures dollar-making better than Smith. The political course of the United States for the next four years is fixed." The Nationalist "Lokalanzeiger" believes the result to mean "that the White House will continue policies which have proved most advantageous to Germany . . ."

The directors of heavy industry evidently have some fears, for their organ, the "Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung," foresees that Hoover may set up formidable barriers against foreign competition; while the liberal "Vossische Zeitung" asks whether his assumption of control may not bring an increase of American aggressiveness in commercial fields and suggests that Germany will need to look out for her South American and Far Eastern markets.

ONLY IN ITALY is expressed any marked regret for the failure of Smith. Officially, the Fascists received word of Hoover's success with satisfaction; but circles close to the Vatican gave signs of disappointment, although not of disillusionment or displeasure. The verdict was obviously anticipated.

The Italian press generally looked for no change in foreign policy or in the American attitude toward debts. Thus the "Tribuna:" "One of the characteristics of the campaign has been an almost complete absence of program of foreign policy . . . Mr. Hoover talked of the United States as the single country that interested Americans and as a country that should be exclusively reserved for Americans. He also promised to raise tariff walls even higher."

Mexico in general appears to be well pleased and hopeful over the future brought into view by the choice of continued Republican control of national policy. From the rest of Latin America we have still to hear.